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MATTHEW COSTELLO

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CEMETERY DANCE MAGAZINE

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WORDS FROM THE EDITOR

RICHARD T. CHIZMAR

CEMETERY DANCE #19 — Welcome back to another issue of Cemetery Dance, the magazine of dark mystery, suspense, and horror. If you have picked us up from a book or specially store and are reading us for the first time . . . we hope you enjoy this issue enough to subscribe or keep an eye out for the Spring Issue, due in retail stores the third week of May.

+ +

Before I get on to the business at hand, I want to offer two represonal asides. First, my heartiest congratulations go out to Cemetery Dence editorial assistant, Adam Fusco. Adam contributes quite a bit to both the magazine and the hard-cover book line, but at heart, he's a writer. And a very talented one. His short fiction is starting to appear in many genre books/magazines; and just last week the news came that his short story, "Breath," originally printed in Peter Crowther's wonderful Touchwook Narrow Houses Volume Two, was selected for the forthcoming Datlow and Windling The Year's Best Fantay and Horror. So . . . congratulations!

And a heartfelt thank you to my good friend (and Kara's best friend) Mindy Fritzie for the absolutely wonderful Christmas gift. She spent what had to be many days crafting a beautifully sculpted version of the CD logo, then she framed it in elegance, and topped it all off with my favorite "start the dance" motto. It's a true work of art, and it means a lot to both of us. Thank you!

+

Take a close look at the front cover of this issue and, after you are overwhelmed by the stunningly gruesome artwork of Alan M. Clark, you will notice the banner headline: 5TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE!

Yeah, I can hardly believe it myself.

But it's true.

I checked just to be sure . . .

The Premiere Issue of Cemetry Dance was—for the record—the Winter 1988 issue, and it shipped in mid-December of that same year. We ran 1,000 copies, and mailed half that number. A few of the authors included in that black-and-white dinosaur of an issue (which ran only 458 pages, with a dozen stories, zero columns and a scattering of poems, for heavensakel) are David B. Silva, Steve Rasnic Tem, Bentley Little, Barry Hoffman, Ronald Kelly, and Roman Ranieri. When I scanned that list earlier today, a single thought ran through my head.

We were damn lucky from the very beginning.

Lucky that so many high caliber writers were willing to have their work published in a brand new magazine. That they were willing to work with this unknown, unproved editor.

I still feel that way today, actually.

Not about the unknown editor part, mind you, but the "lucky" part.

I take a look at my current list of Contributing Editors and pinch myself.

I think about the fact that I've worked with both of my dark fantasy idols—Stephen King and Dean Koontz—and I can only shake my head in wonder. These gentlemen are responsible for my love of this field. So many years ago, it was King's "The Monkey" and then the novels, and soon after it was the suspenseful creations of Koontz; books like Shattered and Phantoms and The Face of Fear.

I think about how closely I work with many of the field's top writers, guys like Ed Gorman and Joe Lansdale and a bunch of others and I can only give my head another shake.

Then, I think about the five figure circulation of this magazine and our fast-growing hardcover line, and I realize that I'm not alone in my love and respect of this type of literature.

And, finally, I think about all the friendships . . .

If all this sounds overly sentimental, or self-indulgent, I apologize. It's just that five years is a long time in the publishing business. Any business, for that matter. Traditional wisdom states that the first year is the toughest. Make it past that and you have a chance. Make it two years and it's even money. Stick around past that third year and you must be doing something right.

For what it's worth, here's my opinion: What we here at CD have done right is very simple: we've pursued a dream very dear to us, we've done so with passion and energy; and, most importantly, we've been blessed with the support of each and every one of you out there—the readers, the writers, the artists, the booksellers.

Accept our warmest thanks . . .

... and we'll see you five more years down the road!

+

That's all for now. It's time to enjoy the issue. We think (hope) you will enjoy it! And please remember that Ingram Periodicals is Cemetery Dance's newsstand distributor. If you frequent a chain store—yes, any chain store—or an independent book or comic store, please ask the manager to carry Cemetery Dance. Thanks—we appreciate your help!

Now turn down the light just a notch, flip the page, take my hand, and start the dance . . .



THE RIGHT THING

GARY RAISOR

GARY RAISOR is the author of the popular vampire novel, Less Than Human (soon to be published as a beautiful hardcover edition from The Overlook Connection Press) and the editor of Obessions. His short fiction is always filled with quirky characters and nasty surprises, and the following tale is no exception.

Downstate Illinois. August.

Something unseen was moving.

It wove in and out of the cornfield, causing the thin, brown stalks to murmur a dry protest.

Two boys, one large, the other small, stood at the edge of the field and watched expectantly.

"Jesus," the small one said, "that could be Old Man Nichol's dog, Steel, in there. What are we gonna do if he sees us?'

An odd, flat expression appeared on the larger boy's face when he looked at his brother. "We'll probably get ripped apart, and our guts'll get spread all over. Then the crows'll come and tear out our eves and eat them." He snickered. "It'll be really disgusting."

"Tommy, you're . . . "

"I'm what?" the older boy asked. "Crazy?" "No."

They watched the corn stalks part. A dog emerged. It wasn't Steel, it was a beagle, and there was something wrong with the animal.

It had no eyes.

The boys watched the dog stagger into the barbed-wire fence, cutting itself to the bone. The animal yelped and lurched back into the cornfield. A line of red trailed after it. After a while the corn stalks quit rustling and quiet settled in.

The older boy, Tommy Lichner, smiled, but it never reached his eyes. His younger brother Michael, who was eleven, breathed a sigh of relief and wiped the sweat from his face. "Wonder what happened to him?"

Tommy shrugged, looked away. "How would I know? Dad'll be back from town pretty soon. We'd better haul ass if we're gonna make the quarry."

"It looks like something tore his eyes out." Michael's freckled face crumpled with pain as he took a hit from his aspirator. His asthma was acting up today. It happened whenever he got too excited. This was his

first trip to the quarry and his adrenalin was pumping. "Are you sure it's okay. About the quarry. Dad said he'd-" Michael's chest hitched. "-skin us alive if he ever caught us near there."

"He's not going to catch us, okay?" Tommy watched his brother struggle to breathe and he started forward. Something in Michael's eyes stopped him.

Michael took another hit from his aspirator and his breathing smoothed out, a ragged engine finally hitting on all cylinders.

"Will you come on?" Tommy touched the barbed-wire fence and his fingers came back red. "I could be doing something fun today instead of taking your scrawny little butt swimming."

"Like what?" Michael's face wrinkled up with curiosity.

"I could be over at Lisa Robinson's house."

"Oh yeah, what's so fun over there?" Michael's voice was teasing.

"None of your business, you little pervert,"

"You brought it up." "Shut up."

They walked in silence for a while, Michael eyeing his brother the way a puppy with a full bladder eyes new carpet. Finally, Michael could stand it no longer. "So you gonna tell me what you been doing over at Lisa Robinson's house?"

Tommy hesitated for a moment, trying to make up his mind about something, then plunged ahead. "I'm trying to get into her pants, okay. I've been trying all summer, but she won't let me. Are you satisfied now? Anything else?"

Michael considered his brother's words and his eyes widened. "You can't." He began laughing with manic glee.

Tommy was afraid his brother was about to have another attack. "Can't what?" Tommy finally asked. "Get in Lisa Robinson's pants, duh."

"Michael." Tommy's voice was ominous.

"She doesn't wear any pants. I heard Stuart

Grimes talking about it." Tommy felt sudden heat building in his stomach.

"How does Stuart know?" "Cause he sits in front of her in home room. He

said he's dropped his pencil so many times everyone thinks he's a spaz."

"Does anybody else in school know about this?" "Everyone except you. There's somethin' else."

"What?" Tommy felt the heat climbing his neck. "Stuart claims he saw her snatch." Michael saved the big news for last and he delivered it with the respect it deserved. "He says she's a real hundred percent

blond."

Tommy paused to consider the mysteries of blond hair, womanhood, and the fact that Stuart Grimes knew his girlfriend didn't wear any underwear. He didn't even know that Lisa didn't wear underwear. "Stuart had better be careful about that big mouth of his. It could get him into trouble." The heat crept across Tommy's face, settled in his eyes. "Real trouble."

"You ain't mad at me are you, Tommy? I didn't tell nobody." Michael was suddenly afraid. What had started out funny had taken a wrong turn and had veered into unknown territory. His brother had a crazy, unpredictable temper.

"No, Michael, I'm not mad at you. Not at you." They tramped on through the prickly afternoon

heat.

Tommy had the oddest sensation someone was watching them. For an instant, he thought he saw a figure standing high on the hill, but he couldn't be sure because of the angle of the sun. He thought that whoever was back there was dressed in white-all in white. The idea that someone was watching them caused a chill to crawl up his back, despite the heat. When he looked again, the hill was vacant. He decided he must be seeing things. Shrugging it off, he kept walking.

Michael tagged along behind.

Tommy tasted dust in the back of his throat and spat it out. "Couple more years and I'm outta this cow fuckers' paradise." He plucked at his NORTHWEST-ERN T-shirt, pulling it away from his sweaty skin. "If I don't die of terminal boredom first. The only thing you can get around here is a heat rash."

"Stuart got a rash," Michael volunteered, "on his Mr. Willy. He got it from Nina Hodgkess."

"One more word about Stuart and we're going home!"

They came to another barbed-wire fence and scooted beneath its strands.

"Wait a minute." Michael spied the small white conductors nailed to the fence posts and he knew the fence was electrified. His expression became suspicious. "I thought you said we were going to the quarry? This is the wrong way, this is Mr. Nichols' farm, this is where Steel . . .

"You're not scared, are you?" Tommy challenged. Michael looked at his brother and squared his thin shoulders defiantly. "No, I'm not scared. It's just a stupid old dog."

"We'll only be a minute. I want to check out something, and then we'll go swimming. Okay?"

"Okay." Michael still sounded dubious.

In the far distance, past the heat waves that rose with watery undulations, a herd of Black Angus cows were crowding under the only tree in the pasture.

Michael took a few steps, changed his mind and stopped, his face going pale. "Tommy, I don't want to go any closer. This is Steel's farm. He guards those cows. You saw what he did to Stuart, bit him in the face. C'mon, Tommy, let's don't do nothing crazy."

"Are you saying I'm crazy?" "No, Tommy." Michael tried to look away. Couldn't.

"Stuart Grimes is a big, fat pussy." Tommy had a bloodless smile painted on his face now, and his eyes had gone all hard and shiny. "Steel probably caught Stuart while he was squatting down to pee." Tommy grabbed Michael by the arm and dragged him toward the cows clustered beneath the tree. Michael's efforts to resist were useless. His older brother was too

As they drew nearer the cows, Tommy started talking again, his voice flat, hard. "I heard Stuart took his old man's twelve-gauge and evened up the score with Steel,"

"He shot Steel?" Michael was stunned.

"That's the rumor going round. We're going to see if it's true, or if Stuart's just blowing more hot air."

The black shapes were growing clearer in the watery heat waves, and the high sweet odor of rotting meat reached Michael. The odor grew stronger with each step. The cows lay sprawled around the tree, twisted into unnatural shapes. Looking at them, all Michael could think about was the train derailment he'd seen up in Fort Wayne, where his dad had taken him for his asthma tests. The dead cows looked just like the boxcars that had been thrown from the tracks that day.

"Whew! Man, they're getting pretty ripe." Tommy fanned the air.

"You think Stuart did this?"

"See the holes in them. They were killed with a shotgun."

Michael edged through the dead cows and something occurred to him. "What if Stuart didn't shoot Steel? What if he's still running around loose?"

Tommy's face never changed expression as he scanned the pasture. "There's Steel, over by the barn." Following his brother's pointing finger, Michael

saw the black shape that scared the shit out of every kid in town-Steel. The hundred twenty pound Rottweiler was dead,

more dead than anything Michael had ever seen in his

But the big dog hadn't died easily. He had fought to the end. His shiny dark hide was pelted with dozens of holes where the shotgun blasts had struck. There

was a trail of blood and slime on the ground where he had crawled toward his attacker, even as he was dying. The last shotgun blast had been the worst, it had caught him square in the face, putting out his eves.

Michael stared down the length of the dog, saw the Rottweiler's intestines were poking out. Dried to stiffness by the sun, they gave the dead animal a sadly festive air, sort of like pink curb feelers on an overturned, trashed black Cadillac.

"How come he's all split open?" Michael asked.
"It's the heat that causes it. Makes them swell up

till they pop."

Michael didn't know how to respond to that. He tried not to look at Steel, but he couldn't help himself.

There were things feeding on Steel. Flies and crows mostly. The crows were busy tearing out chunks of pinkish gray flesh and flapping away.

With uneasy fascination, Michael watched the scannegers pick over the carcass of the dog. The boy had never thought something as big and mean as Steel would ever die. Could ever die. He yanked his arm free of Tommy's grip and threw up, his pink Berry Berry Kix spewing onto the tops of his K-Mart specials with wet, splattering sounds. When he saw his breakfast was the same color as the flesh the crows were pulling from Steel, he retched again.

Tommy examined the dog's wounds with a calm, knowing eye. "Looks like a twelve gauge to me. Man, Stuart wasn't blowing hot air, that shithead really did it. He killed Steel."

"We got to tell somebody." Michael took a hit from his aspirator. It did little to ease his cramping chest. "How come Mr. Nichols don't know about thie?"

"Cause he's in South Bend at his daughter's."

Tommy was paying little attention to Michael, he only had eyes for Steel. "That bastard's gone. I can't fucking believe it." Tommy fired a dirt clod at the dead dog and it struck him on the flank, turning into a puff of dust. The crows took lazily to the air. The flies paid little attention; they kept on eating.

"He was mean." Tommy's voice was reverent. "The meanest."

"Yeah, he was the meanest," Michael agreed.

Tommy's voice was wistful. "You peed your pants the first time you saw him."

Michael grinned. He should have felt good, after all, the boogie man was dead, and he wouldn't have to be scared of him anymore. But Michael didn't feel good. An indefinable sense of loss had come over him, and when he looked over at Tommy, he knew his brother felt the same way. Some of the magic was gone from their lives. Never to return.

They started to walk away when a plaintive mewling caused them to halt.

A puppy staggered out from behind the barn, a



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Craig Goden 313 Beechwood Ave. Middlesex, NJ 08846 (908) 560-0738 Rottweiler. Their talking must have awakened it. The baby stared at them for a moment and tried to balance on unsteady legs. Deciding the two boys posed no threat, it managed to lurch over to where they stood.

"Where did you come from?" Michael knelt and

stroked the puppy.

Tommy walked over to the corner of the barn and looked into the shadows. "That's where he came from." Tommy jerked his head at a dead female Rottweiler and her five dead puppies. All of them had been shotgunned. Some were in pieces.

The puppy staggered over to its mother and tried to nurse. Its mewling became a constant thing when

it couldn't get any milk.

"The little guy's in bad shape." Tommy gently touched the pellet holes in the baby Rottweiler's skin. "I can't believe it, that asshole Stuart shot the puppies too. I wonder why didn't he finish off this one?"

"Maybe it was under the mother, and Stuart didn't see it." Michael touched the puppy's dry nose. It began sucking on his fingers. "What are we gonna do? You think Dad'll let us keep him?"

"Nah, Dad won't let us have a dog. He hates 'em." Tommy continued stroking the shiny black hide, and Michael could tell his brother was trying to make up his mind about something.

"Can't let him suffer," Tommy said, picking up the puppy. "It wouldn't be the right thing to do."

"What're you gonna do, Tommy?"

Tommy stared into the eyes of the puppy, and its tail wagged feebly while it tried to lick his face. Then it began whining and lowered its head, as though it had grown too heavy to hold up. A thin line of bloody mucus trailed from the puppy's nose, ran onto Tommy's hands, trickled into the dust. Tommy watched without expression while he stroked the tiny head with gentle fingers. "Little bastard looks just like his dad, doesn't he?"

The puppy seemed suddenly content and it snuggled up in Tommy's arms.

Michael watched wordlessly.

Tommy finally took the puppy over to the water trough where the cows drank.

"Don't do it, Tommy. Shit-"

Tommy lowered the puppy in. The baby Rottweiler's mouth opened wide as it tried desperately to breathe. Bubbles floated to the top, burst. Tommy held it under until it quit thrashing.

When Michael looked into the pink water, he saw the puppy had no eyes. Tommy had gouged them out.

Tommy wiped the sweat from his face with the back of a trembling hand. He was breathing heavily. "Come on Michael, I thought we were going swimming today." Tommy walked back to the fence in silence, his feet throwing up puffs of dust that hung in the still afternoon air like accusing eyes.

When Tommy wouldn't look back, Michael knew his older brother was crying.

Michael knew Tommy didn't like anybody to see him crying. It ruined his tough-guy act.

A little later Michael caught up, and they pushed through the bone-white sycamores, until they came to a NO TRESPASSING sign. Someone had painted three small crosses on it.

"It's the number of kids that's supposed to have drowned here," Tommy said.

"No shit?"

"Yeah, no shit,"

The two boys got down on their stomachs and crawled beneath the strands of barbed wire that guarded the path to the quarry.

Michael smelled something cool and damp in the air. The quarry was close, but he didn't feel much like swimming now.

Michael stood at the rim of the abandoned rock quarry and stared down with awe. "I didn't know it was so big." The glassy surface stretched out of sight, a gash in the earth that ran for miles. Slabs of limestone, as high as a man was tall, lay along the edges of the water as though they were blocks left by some gigantic child who had been called away. The rocks were streaked with red, the color of diluted blood.

"This is where Dad used to work." Tommy spat in the water, like the words left a bad taste in his mouth.

Hundreds of cattails were clustered around the bank on the far side, and when a breeze sprang up, their heads bent together, and their soft, clicking voices whispered secrets Tommy couldn't quite decipher. He knew they were whispering about him, though.

"How come the water turns black?" Michael asked

"Cause it's real deep." Tommy skimmed a stone. "How deep you think it is?" Michael nervously asked, picking up a stone and trying to duplicate his brother's feat. His stone only skipped twice before being dragged down. The water looked hungry.

"Don't know. Could be a couple hundred feet, maybe more. You ain't getting scared again, are you?"

Michael dropped his gaze, stung by the accusation. "I ain't scared."

Tommy saw the hurt expression and his tone softened. "Come on, lighten up." A sudden smile crossed his face as he yanked off his T-shirt. "Last one in asks Lisa Robinson if she dyes her cunt hair."

Michael giggled.

Tommy began stripping off his jeans, hopping on one leg when they stuck to his sweaty skin. Before he could free himself, he fell into the water. When he popped to the surface, he threw his soggy jeans onto shore.

Something fell out of the pocket. It was a shotgun shell.

"I picked it up at the farm," Tommy said with an casy, guileless smile. He stroked toward deeper water where a huge, inflated innertube floated.

Michael saw the shotgun shell was unfired and something frightening occurred to him. What if Tommy had killed all those animals at Old Man Nichols' place? Michael didn't want to think about that. Because that would mean his brother really was

"You'd better hurry up if you're gonna get your scrawny, little butt wet," Tommy yelled. "We already wasted too much time on those dogs."

Michael cast a furtive glance at the quarry, scared of his brother and scared now that he had to go into the water. His hands shook when he placed his aspirator on the rocks. He walked to the water's edge, hesitated.

"Come on, dingle berry, jump. I won't do nothing to you."

"You promise?" Michael danced from foot to foot on the hot rocks, looking into Tommy's eyes, while he tried to decide whether his older brother was crazy or not. "You wouldn't ever hurt me, would you, Tommy?"

Tommy smiled.

Making up his mind, Michael leaped. The water sucked him down, closing over his head, pulling at him with flat, cold hands. He bit back a scream, clawed his way to the surface.

Tommy was watching. There was something unreadable in his eyes.

Michael waited for some comment on his bravery, but Tommy's face still held that distant expression. That meant something bad was going to happen.

"The water's freezing my nuts off," Michael said.
"You don't have any nuts. You're too little."

Michael smiled and clung to the innertube. "Hey, Tommy, they ever find the kids that drowned here?"

"No. Just their tracks at the edge of the quarry."

Michael digested this information. "You think
they're still in here?"

"Yeah, what's left of them."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there'd just be some bones, maybe a little hair, after the turtles and everything got through. No eyes though. Their eyes would be gone."

"No shit." Michael was quiet as they drifted into the shadow of the rock wall on the far side of the quarry. He looked at it and was more afraid than ever. Trickles of water oozed down the stones, thick and dark, red as blood seeping from the skin of some wounded animal. He thought of Steef's puppy and how blood had spilled from its nose before it had died.
Off in the distance came the low whine of a truck
pulling the grade on the Interstate. The sound reminded him of something in pain.

Michael turned to his brother. "How come you gouged out the puppy's eyes?"

"I don't know." Tommy looked away. "Maybe I didn't want him looking at me."

"Did you do it to the beagle we saw?"

"Jesus, will you knock off with all the questions. Who cares about some stupid old dog?" Anger colored Tommy's voice. "Beagles are slow and dumb, you know. Kinda like you. Maybe he was sad because he couldn't catch any rabbits. Maybe he decided to kill himself and fucked up the job. Okay?"

"Okay. Can I ask you just one more question?"

Tommy looked suddenly very tired, but he nodded. "Is it about the cows and the Rottweilers?"

"Sort of. You promise you won't get mad?" Michael asked.

"I won't get mad."

Michael took a deep breath, exhaled, and screwed up his courage. "Are you really . . . you know . . . like what the kids at school say?"

"Crazy? That's what they say, isn't it, that I'm crazy?" Tommy looked into Michael's eyes. And for a second, everything dissolved, it was like he was looking into a window of some other place, that there were people in that other place, people dressed all in white, and they were looking back at him. The teenager squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them.

And everything was okay. The people in white

"This trip's turning into a fucking drag." Tommy shaded his eyes and looked over at the rock face. "Hey, Michael, you wanna see me do something neat?"

Michael's gaze traveled up the rock wall and he realized what his brother was about to do. "No, Tommy, don't be stupid, it's too high. Don't do nothing crazy." Too late, he realized he had said the worst thing he could have said, the very worst.

"You think I'm crazy, well I'll show you crazy," Tommy swam ashore, scrambled across the rocks and disappeared into the sumac bushes. Several minutes later the teenager emerged at the top of the rock face, sevently feet above the water. Even though he flashed a wide smile, Michael could see Tommy was afraid.

"We'd better get home!" Michael cupped his hands around his mouth. "Dad's gonna be looking for us!"

"Dad can kiss my ass. I ain't scared of him."
Tommy moved closer to the edge and a handful of
stones rattled down, taking forever to strike the black
water below. He watched them hit and it seemed like
a dream. He heard Michael calling. It was all a dream.

"Wait, Tommy. I can't breathe, I can't-"

Tommy leaped into space.

Michael watched his brother descend, growing larger against the cloudless blue sky. Tommy was a good diver, but something was wrong. He must have slipped, he was flailing his arms in circles, trying to regain his balance as he plummeted downward. The distance between him and the water grew shorter. He wasn't going to get straightened out in time. Tommy's mouth opened in a wide oval, a scream that he was too terrified to utter. He smacked the water and it erupted in a violent gevser, stinging Michael.

And just like that, Tommy was gone.

Michael was too frozen to even flinch. Anxiously he waited for his brother to pop to the surface.

This had to be a joke, but Tommy didn't appear. The ripples lengthened. Died. The surface became as smooth as glass.

"Tommy, you shithead, quit it. I ain't laughing." The seconds ticked by with agonizing slowness and still the water remained undisturbed. A dragonfly hovered, lit, sat motionless for a few seconds, and then buzzed away. Time had ceased to exist.

A faint breeze ruffled Michael's hair. He wished he had his aspirator as he listened for a sound.

There was only silence. The cattails weren't even whispering now.

This wasn't a joke; Tommy was down there in the water, way down where it was dark and cold. Where he couldn't breathe. Michael knew what that was like. He had to find Tommy. The innertube squeaked a shrill warning when Michael slid across it and fell into the watery blackness waiting below.

He groped downward, fighting back his fear.

Fighting not to breathe.

He had to find Tommy.

The quarry squeezed his chest with its soft, heavy hands when he went deeper.

Complete darkness now.

Groping.

Kicking.

Deeper, deeper, no up, no down. No Tommy. Only this empty, terrifying vastness. Just as he was about to explode, he bumped into

something. Something cold. Hard. Whatever it was moved,

wrapped around his foot, and held him fast. He kicked, trying to break free.

Fighting away panic, he started to reach down to see what held him. But the panic won out, his air was gone, and he began thrashing back and forth. Seconds passed. The tapping sound of his heart echoed in his ears, a small hard pebble skimming across the water. Clawing, his fingers raking water, he kept reaching for the surface. It remained out of reach. Whatever had hold of him wasn't letting go. He opened his mouth and screamed, and his life began spewing out in tiny silvery bubbles.

When the last bubble was gone, Michael took a

Water filled his lungs and it was a sledgehammer made of ice.

He opened his mouth again, sucked more water into his lungs. It was warmer now. The cold was going away, along with his fear, along with the pain, and he wondered what he had been afraid of all this time. The water wouldn't hurt him. The water was his friend. He took another breath, and the cold was gone.

All gone.

Before the darkness came for him, Michael saw Steel. Saw the huge Rottweiler was trying to show him something. The dog was trotting down a long, brightly lit hallway, headed toward a door at the far end. The door was closed and water was oozing out from beneath. Running along the black and white linoleum.

The door flew open, and Michael saw there was someone in a bathtub, lying beneath the water. He couldn't make out the face because of a stream of bubbles that covered the surface.

The door closed. And Steel was dead, shot full of holes. And then there was only darkness.

Seconds passed. Michael breathed one last time and a few bubbles floated to the surface of the quarry. then stopped.

Everything became serene.

The dragonfly again lit, and the cattails whispered.

A ripple stirred below. Something was coming. As the insect launched itself into the still air-

Tommy appeared.

He sucked in air and flung an arm across the innertube. When he began making his way to shore, he tried not to look at the small aspirator gleaming in the sun. His face was pale and his eyes were filled with shadows. "I'm sorry, Michael, I'm sorry. It was the only way." He collapsed face down among the rocks and began gagging. Afterward, still crying, he lifted his head and wiped the bitter puke from his mouth. "I wished we could've said goodbye, but I couldn't stand you looking at me. Not you."

The sound of water lapping against the rock shore came to him, languid, peaceful, and he thought he might rest here for a moment. Just a few seconds. He was more tired than he could ever remember. Too tired to get up. The sun felt good on his icy skin. He thought about his brother and wondered if Michael was cold. Did dead people feel cold? He hoped not. His eyes grew heavy as he watched a white bird spin away from the quarry wall. He watched while it climbed higher and higher, until it finally became a speck against the cloudless blue sky. The bird was free, without guilt, and how Tommy envied it.

His eyes closed and he slept.

And while he slept, he dreamed . . . about a man and the five-year-old boy at his side.

Δr Δr

The boy and the man stood on a creek bank, watching the turgid, green water slide by, each of them lost in his own thoughts. The heat was brutal. As the sun gazed down at them through the oaks, the boy tried to wipe away the wetness gathering in his eyes.

In the distance, heavy dark clouds inched closer, wrapping themselves around the sun, slowly smothering it. Thunder rumbled.

The boy held a burlap sack in his hands. Inside, something moved.

"Son, little things can't fend for themselves." The man's voice was patient, yet tinged with suppressed anger. "They got to have big things to take care of them, or they die." The man snapped off a piece of a branch and threw it into the water. The creek sucked it under.

The boy stared straight ahead, his face carved from stone. Only his shiny-wet eyes betrayed his desperation.

The man bent down on one knee and looked into the boy's eyes as he struggled to explain. He was a man unused to talking. "Those puppies in your sack got no mother to take care of them. They're sick and they're going to die slow. They'll suffer. You don't want that, do you?"

The boy shook his head no, scuffing bare callused feet in the dirt as he tried to swallow the lump in his throat. He felt his father's hand on his sunburned shoulder, but he didn't flinch and he didn't pull away. That would make his father angry. He didn't want to make his father angry.

"Sometimes, a man has to do things that are hard," his father explained. "That's what being a man is all about. Taking responsibility. No matter what." He lifted the oil-smudged baseball cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I want you to prove to me that you're ready to be a man. You know what you got to do, don't you?"

The boy nodded, the movement almost imperceptible.

"The longer you wait, the harder it's going to be," the man said. The cap went back on and there was something final in the gesture.

"We could get them some medicine," the boy said in a small voice. "Then they wouldn't be sick."

The hand on the boy's shoulder tightened and, this time, he flinched.

"We ain't got money to buy medicine for a bunch of stray pups." The hand dug deeper into the small shoulder. The pain was intense. "They laid me off at the quarry, they said they'll call me back soon as things pick up." The seams in the tired, bitter face deepened.
"That's a goddamned lie, the quarry's finished and
everybody knows it."

The boy looked at his father and the boy was sure this was somehow his fault. Maybe, if just this once, he could make his father proud of him, everything would be okay. It would be back to like it was before Mom died.

The boy clutched the coarse burlap and lifted with all his strength, and yet, try as he might, he couldn't raise the bag off the ground. Whimpers of pain accompanied his struggle to drag the squirming contents nearer the water. The bag tangled in a tree root, turning the whimpers into yelps. As he kept edging nearer the creek, he thought about how small the pupples were, he thought about how they had licked his hand with their tiny, pink, sandpaper tongues when he had lowered their wriggling bodles into the bag.

He thought about how they would look

-dead.

Teetering at the edge of the creek, he looked at his father and hesitated. His eyes held a final, desperate appeal.

His father looked away.

The boy took a deep breath and pushed the bayinches went at It landed with a splash and it should have went down quickly, but it didn't, because there was an air pocket keeping it afloat. The shrill yaps of the puppies filled the boy's ears and the bag boiled as they fought to escape. He covered his ears. Then the air pocket began leaking, spewing bubbles like some childish game the boy played in the bathtub. The bag held steady for a bit, then listed to one side, then slid under. The yammering was silenced.

In a moment, the puppies were gone as though they had never existed.

But somehow one had gotten free. It swam gamely for the shore.

A second before the puppy would reach safety, the man knelt and pushed it under. The boy watched its small, pink tongue unfurl as it struggled to breathe. He watched as it died. The last thing he saw was the puppy's accusing eyes staring back at him from beneath the water. The boy stood with his own eyes fixed on the spot where the puppy had gone under, watching blankly while a last bubble floated up. It was quiet under the oaks, growing suddenly cool when the storm clouds at last wrapped themselves around the sun. A shiver passed through the boy and he wondered if he would ever be warm again. He turned away from the creek. He couldn't face his reflection.

Something was wrong with the eyes staring back at him. His eyes.

A rough hand grabbed his arm and pulled him around, made him look at the creek. "I'm proud of you," his father said, approval and regret mixed in the



seamed face. "What you did might seem harsh to you now, son, but someday you'll look back on this and see you did the right thing."

The first drops of rain began falling, softly at first, then harder, distorting his reflection. But not the eyes that looked back at him. Not the eyes.

"Yes sir, I did the right thing," the boy repeated, looking into his father's eyes. He saw they were the same green as the creek, and in their depths he saw dead puppies floating, swirling around and around, staring accusingly at him with their long pink tongues lolling from their mouths.

Another voice spoke to Tommy, pulling him around. It wasn't his father's voice. "Look at me, Tommy. How many more times are we gonna do this?"

Tommy opened his sleep-heavy eyes to see his younger brother sitting on the rocks beside the quarry. "Hi, Michael, what are you doing here? I thought I killed you."

"You did." Michael frowned as he did some quick arithmetic in his head. "This makes nine hundred and eighty-three times you killed me."

"Then why do you keep coming back?"

"Because you keep bringing me back, you stupid shit. You're the one who keeps doing this over and over." The small boy was watching Tommy intently, curiosity on his face. "It's not going to change. You can't bring me back. You need to let go of me."

Tommy looked around at the quarry, saw the water was red as blood now. The sun was going down, and he realized he must have slept a long time. "I was dreaming about white rooms, Michael, endless rows of white rooms. And people with dead-white skin who keep watching me. I hear them whispering my name. What do they want?"

"They want you to let go, to get on with your life."
Tommy recoiled as their gaze locked, held. All
the strength left him. "What are you talking about?"

"Letting go of the past. Don't you get it? The people you see in your dreams are doctors. You went crazy, Tommy, crazy as a shithouse rat. Now you live in a little white room where they have to watch you all the time." Michael ran a hand through his water-soaked hair and propped himself against a sycamore. "I only live in your mind. I've been dead almost three years now. I had asthma. Tommy, real bad asthma. You took me swimming while Dad was gone to town." Michael's gaze shifted to the sun-glinted water. "And you drowned me." He smilled. "I guess you thought it

"It was," Tommy said softly, without conviction.
"It's not so easy doing the right thing, is it? The
doctors said the asthma might have killed me sooner
or later, so maybe my drowning was a blessing. The
only problem was, you couldn't accept my death. You

was the right thing to do."

kept on blaming yourself."

"You were suffering, I saw what the asthma was doing to you. I couldn't help but see. You were always following me around like a little . . . "

"Puppy," Michael finished. He laughed. "We know what you do to puppies, don't we?"

Tommy flinched. In Michael's eyes he'd caught a glimpse of dead puppies floating, swirling around and around, staring accusingly at him with their long pink tongues lolling from their mouths.

"See something you didn't like?" Michael's grin was guileless. "That's right, you don't like to look 'em in the eyes, do you? That must be why you pretended your dive went wrong. So you could get me down there where it was dark."

Tommy watched Steel come over to Michael to have his ears scratched. "I was only doing what I thought was right."

"Well, then, don't take it so hard," Michael said with a shrug. "Besides, it doesn't do any good. My death was for the best. You said so yourself, you did the right thing."

"I killed three other kids, too. Brought them out here and drowned them. They died easy, Michael, without a fight." Tommy grabbed hold of Michael's shirt and held on. His brother's shirt was wet, cold. "I did it because they were sick... I would've killed more if they hadn't caught me."

Michael's eyes settled on Tommy's stricken face. There was only compassion in their depths. "You're my brother," Michael said. "I forgive you."

"But I can't forgive me. Don't you understand, I can't forgive me."

"Then you know what you gotta do? You're not scared, are you?"

Tommy smiled, and there was something fragile in the smile. "No, I'm not scared. Not anymore." He stared at his d at his reflection in the water, watching it ripple beneath the hot, dry evening wind that pushed across the quarry. Something about his image disturbed him and he couldn't figure out what it was, not until the cattalis whispered the answer to him. They had been trying to tell him all along. He nodded his understanding. His voice was filled with sadness as he began walking into the water. "I just wanted to do the right thing, Michael... that's all I ever wanted... was to do the right thing." He kept walking until the water closed over his head.

In a small white room, the last bubble floated up from the overflowing tub, and the face of Tommy Lichner appeared in the water. And it was peaceful at last. At long last. When the nurse found him, she saw he had dug his eyes from their sockets.

And was still holding them in his clenched fists.

_ CD



On Nostradamus, Jean Dixon, Doomsayers, Cheerleaders, and Other Psychic Phenomena:

Some years ago, a young woman of my acquaintance cajoled me into letting her read my palm. It was . . . interesting. Unfortunately (because of what she said), nothing she saw there came true. A few years later, another woman of my acquaintance took one look at my palm and said, "My God, look at all those wrinklest"

I've also been scanned by astrologists (once), Tarot readers, delvers into reincarnation, and a couple of self-proclaimed psychics, most of whom were experts in spotreading of people's characters, and all of whom were lousy at prediction. I'm still not rich, 1996 (pick a year, it doesn't matter) did not turn out to be my best year yet, and my hair is still falling out.

Nostradamus, on the other hand, knew his stuff. At least, he knew how to make it sound as if he knew his stuff. He was so vague, and just flashy enough, that people who hanker for such things have no doubt that he predicted world wars, spot wars, cold wars, specific dictators, and Orson Welles.

The writing field has its own crystal-gazers as well, and as long as this particular column will be out somewhere around the beginning of 1994 (it's being written at the beginning of December, 1993), I reckon I might as well take a shot at it myself. After all, I've had some experience, I have some knowledge, I'm probably already in trouble for just thinking about doing this, and I have a big mouth—all of which makes me about as qualified as anyone for looking ahead sagely and with benign compassion to what will happen to writers and publishing during the next twelve months.

And yes, I will stand by every they're wrong, let me know immediately so I can adjust to the times and blame someone else for my folly; if they're correct, I will adjust to the times and take full credit.

As far as you writers are concerned: don't bother skimming this to find your name. You're probably not here. I'm dumb, but I ain't stupid.

With all that in mind, here are my twenty-two, sure-fire predictions for 1994:

1. Coppeditors throughout the civilized world still won't know how to spell Dr Pepper. Which is to say, they'll continue to put in the .after the Dr, and we will, of course, all be the better for it. As long as I'm at it, they still won't know the difference between a sentence that begins with "immediately" with a comma, and "immediately" without the comma. And when we fix it, they'll ignore it anyway. Thirdly,

they'll be so lacking in historical/literary background that they'll question every allusion, metaphor, and outright mention of such arcane knowledge, assuming that the public is as stupid as they arc.

And when we change it back to the way it's supposed to be, they'll ignore it.

- 2. Some nearsighted accountant will look at some computer figures, ignore the reading public, and declare horror/sf/mystery/romance/westerns/thriller dead. Lines will be cut, titles slashed. prices raised, and the genre will become comatose for about six to seven months, at which point somebody will notice a gap and start buying again. This is what's known as the "Boom and Bust" cycle, which sounds like something I used to go to at the old Hudson Theater in New York City while I was in college. That, however, was a lot more fun.
- 3. Sometime during the year, somebody will lambast an author because he received too much money too soon in his career. Last year (1993) it was Poppy Z. Brite, vilified by a number of small-minded, green-eyed beanpods because she made a few bucks; thereby, apparently, depleting the resources available to the rest of us who are, of course, far more de-

serving, both in talent and financial need. They did not, however, (and will not) vilify Stephen King or Dean Koontz, even though those gentlemen no doubt paid more in taxes than Poppy received even before her agent and Uncle Sam took their cuts.

- In a corollary prediction, Ms Brite will probably outlast every one of those beanpods.
- 5. Publishers will continue to exhort their authors to come up with that all-important "breakthrough novel," even though neither they nor the author will have the slightest idea what it will look like. And when it doesn't happen, everyone will get grumpy. "Breakthrough novel," by the way, is a technical term meaning bestseller. "Bestseller" is a technical term as well, meaning what an author wants all his books to be, and what a publisher couldn't produce on purpose if his life depended on it. And when it doesn't happen, the author gets the blame because he didn't write one; and the publisher gets the blame because he didn't make it happen. When this happens once too often, the publisher dumps the author, the author dumps the agent, and fingers get pointed in so many directions, everybody gets cross-eyed. And grumpier than they were the first time.
- 6. Publishers will continue to practice indefensible business methods by heavily promoting that which needs little promotion, and ignoring that which they claim they are solidly behind. In other words, the Cadillacs will get 90% of the promotion money, and the Taurus's will get, probably, zilch.
- 7. The check will be in the mail; the contract will be in the mail; and the editor will have just stepped out of the office.
- 8. The writer will get the flu, the writer's kid will play paper dolls

with the manuscript, the manuscript will be in the mail, the printer will die, the computer will die, and nobody makes ribbons for that typewriter anymore, except in a small village in Alberta.

9. Horror, after several years of literal nonsense packaging, will continue to be recognized for what it really is—a sometimes but not always vital element in a story; not what it isn't—a category of genre fiction as definable as, say, science

fiction. This will not, however, stop some folks from publishing horror as category genre fiction, thereby allowing them to declare that horror is dead.

10. Every horror story/novel that takes place in a small town will be called derivative of Stephen King; every horror story/novel that has olts of cross-country action will be called derivative of Dean Koontz; every horror story/novel that is even vaguely poetic in nature will



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1500 Shadowridge Drive, #125 Vista, California 92083 (619) 598-2734 be declared derivative of Ray Bradbury; and anything that is labeled "the cutting edge of horror" won't be, because nobody knows what the hell that is, but it sure sounds good.

11. Women writers will complain about the Good Old Boys club, which prevents them from getting enough attention, enough anthology slots, and enough money; male writers will complain that women writers get too much attention, too many anthology slots, and too much money.

None of these people will ever accept the fact that perhaps, just perhaps, they either don't write so hot, or the public doesn't like what they write even if they write pretty good.

- 12. Stephen Gallagher, James Herbert, and Stephen Laws will still be the most underrated, and underpromoted, non-US writers in the US.
- 13. Somebody, somewhere, will come up with a new "dark" label for genre fiction. As in, Dark Suspense, Dark Mystery, Dark Fantasy, Dark SP, Dark Cyber, or Dark Gothic. There will not, however, be Dark Romance. The new label will be just as meaningless as the old ones. But it'll look good on the cover.
- 14. The beanpods that write cover copy will still give away too much of the plot. They will also give away the ending. They will conse-

quently defend this practice by claiming that they need to get the reader to buy the book by tempting them with juicy bits from within the book itself; or, they will say they don't have enough time to do it right, and if the writer doesn't like it, he can do it himself. As if, of course, that justifies giving away the ending, or the twist, or the mystery.

- 15. Any writer who criticizes publishers for their occasional stupidity will be accused of being naive and not understanding of the business; any publisher who accuses writers of being naive and ignorant of the business will be accused of false advertising and bad complexions.
- 16. Genre writers will continue to lambast mainstream writers for concentrating on Art instead of story. They will then declare that they would prefer to be read by only a handful of dedicated and intelligent readers, rather than prostitute themselves by actually writing something somebody will pay for and lots of people will read. This will be hailed as "taking a stand against commercialism" by some, and "bone-headedness" by others. It will not address the fact that garrets went out of style a couple of hundred years ago, and Dickens and Hemingway wrote for money.
- 17. The horror small press will attack HWA for insisting on professionalism and professional

- standards; and HWA will continue to play political correctness and dilute its professionalism and professional standards.
- 18. Everybody will grouse about the Stokers, the Nebulas, the Hugos, the Edgars, and the Whatevers, denouncing them as unfair, biased, and worthless.
- 19. Somebody will say, "Hey, I don't mind losing. It was an honor just to be nominated."
- 20. There will continue to be no nekkid barbarian women at conventions. Nekkid barbarian men, either, for that matter.
- 21. Vampire books will still flood the shelves, will still emphasize the alleged romance and seductive qualities of the vampire, and will still ignore the fact that A) vampires are dead, which makes it kind of hard to sympathize with a woman or man who wants to get it on with them; and B) vampires are just as nasty as werewolves, but they're prettier, unless you like your men/women hairy.
- 22. I will continue to be labeled a male chauvinist scummy cranky old-fashioned autocratic out-oftouch Old Fart pig. I will also continue not to give a damn.

And from this place of mine to that place of yours, have a great deal of good health, good fortune, and laughter.



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ED Gorman

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"Good writing is not mystery writing, it's not western writing, horror writing, science fiction writing. Good writing is good writing. It can be appreciated by anyone who picks up the book. In that sense, I think (John D.) MacDonald is right. It doesn't matter what you write about, there really isn't enough of the good stuff to go around."

-Stephen King, Bare Bones

Had a call the other day from the virtual test of the call, I discovered after a few minutes, was to give me a sort of literary pep talk. Seems she and her group of writers had been discussing writers whom they felt should be better known, and my name was mentioned.

Understand this. She meant and was in fact rather endearing: in an indifferent world few people ever take the trouble to worry about people the way this woman and her friends worried about me.

She said: "We think you should stick to big suspense novels and not do any more westerns or horror novels or things like that." And you know what? From a

And you know what? From a strictly commercial point of view, she's absolutely correct. Big suspense novels make sense.

And, in fact, thanks to Bob Gleason, Managing Editor of Tor, that's just what I have been doing for nearly two years now, writing a large novel about the relationship between our government in Washington and our secular Vatican in Hollywood. It's called The Marilym Tapes and it's about JFK trying to retrieve some tapes from Marilym Monroe's bedroom—tapes that J. Edgar Hoover could use to blackmail him. Or even bring down his government.

The research for this was enormous. I hired a very bright young woman in LA to help me with all the 1962 period detail, and I hired her male counterpart in DC to help me do the same there. I must have logged 100 hours in several libraries myself. This doesn't include the private investigators I interviewed or some of the old movie studio people who were willing to talk off the record. (I got a lot of great Marilyn stuff from a retired studio cinematographer.)

Was all this worth it? I hope so. I did seven or eight drafts (depending on how you define "draft"), wrote over 2,000 pages, and learned more about writing through Bob Gleason than I did in the first seven years of my professional career. The worth of the book is for you to decide. It can be yours for twenty-some dollars in January of '95.

So what next? Well, I plan to write another large political novel. In fact, I plan to write—and have sold from outline—two more large political novels. I spent several years as a speechwriter for various congressmen and governors and am a life-long political junkie. Political thrillers are probably what I should be writing.

But this is where my friend on the phone and I disagree. While I know that he who is not busy being born is busy dying (in publishing terms that means you lift yourself bodily out of the midlist or you sink back into the quicksand and vanish forever), I also know that when my time comes to die, I want to look at a row of books on my shelf that gave me pleasure to write, and through which I was able to say at least a few things about myself and my time on the planet.

Yes, I am ambitious; and yes, I would very much like to be a successful popular novelist. Dean Koontz-big or Stephen Kingbig or Michael Crighton-big is out of the question—but I do think that mine can be a more formidable market-place name than it is today (I honeatly believe that I can sell more than 6,288 copies in paperback, at least once I start peddling the doort-odoor. With a gun.)

But ambition aside, I will still, when I am so moved, write the occasional small book, the western or the dark suspense novel. Probably under a pen-name. Probably with my agent grinding his teeth. But so be it.

There are some stories that

can be told only as westerns, some only as horror, some only as mystery. You have to tell them as they come to you.

An example would be my last two westerns, Wolf Moon and The Sharpshooter (and yes, I know that I'm talking about myself in this column but the subject matter requires it.*)

I'd been reading Edmund I thought, Gee, I've never really tried to write a simple campfire story before, maybe it would be fun. At the same time, I was also writing a piece on Gold Medal books and reading through several early issues of Black Mask that had been used as props on the set of "Hammett." (As the editor of Mystery Sens, I occasionally get some pretty nifty gifts.)

All these elements converged and I decided to make "Moon" a folk tale written along the lines of the early John D. Gold Medal originals (Soft Touch being one of my favorite books of his) and the second written to that strange amajam of hardboiled crime and western that was Black Mask's hallmark for its first few years. I wanted to update both forms, stand them on their heads if possible, and see if there was anything fresh I could briny to them.

These books could not have been written as anything but westerns. The form chose me more than I chose it. I had a great time writing them but—

A few days ago an editor called and said maybe I'd like to do a western for him and I said let me think it over for a few days. The notion of a western appealed to me but when I sat down and actually started thinking through some ideas, I realized that I had no real compulsion to write a western. I'd just be filling up pages. I called him back and respectfully declined.

I may be through with west-

erns for life. Maybe I've done everything I knew how to do with the form. So, for right now, I've given up the western. But I'm not doing this because it's a good career move, I'm doing this because I don't have anything passionate to give to it. But maybe five years from now I'll get an idea I can't resist—and I'll write it. Maybe it'll have to go out under a pen-name but that's all right. All that matters is that I be open to it as a piece of work and bring to it all the fire and skill I can.

Same goes with horror. Or science fiction. If I get a good idea.

Parting shot: I think that work done passionately can only improve you as a writer. Tor sent "Marilyn" out for quotes and one writer not only gave us a great blurb but wrote me a letter about the book and said that what he liked about it was "the quirks and spontaneity of the characters. Hell, these are the same folks you have in your mysteries and westerns and your better horror novels-the whole sick crew. You managed to write a 'bigger' book with real heart. I was afraid you were going to give us all those plastic humanoids they put in big books these days." That's the nicest compliment I've yet received about "Marilyn"-that I kept my same loopy cast of characters. The same ones I discovered lurking in the pages of my genre books. The same ones I can't wait to meet most mornings at the old computer. But I couldn't have written it any other way because I want writing to be fun for me and fun means writing about people I like and fear for and admire-the same crazy bastards that are in all my books. Yes, I want to write bigger and more important books but I don't want to lose the better qualities of my genre books, either. I hope I can wed them successfully with the larger novels.

These days, a writer has to be

two people, craftsman and businessman. Sometimes these two roles conflict. Occasionally you have to make decisions that favor the businessman slightly more than the writer.

But if you ever get to the point where the businessman wins all the big battles, you've not only let your readers down-you've let yourself down, too. Writing's got to be fun, for me anyway.

* Next issue I'll be my familiar self-effacing guy again.

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WALL OF WORDS

LUCY TAYLOR

LUCY TAYLOR's short fiction will soon appear in a variety of publications, including Hot Blood 4, Splatterpunks 2, and Ellen Datlow's upcoming anthology of cat horror stories. Her fiction has also been collected in the chapbook, Unnatural Acts (TAL Publications) and Close to the Bone (Silver Salamander Press). This is her first appearance in Cemetery Dance.

I burned the Wall of Words last night, right before I headed south on Highway 87 toward Colorado.

It torched just like a big old funeral pyre, and I watched 'til the last ember sizzled and charred and the last vowel crisped and the final consonant became just so much soot.

Pa's famous Wall of Words, the talk of northwest Nebraska, that people came all the way from Denver and Sioux Falls and Kansas City to see, now it's only so much blackened kindling.

No more words.

Just silence, except for the breeze whistling through cinders and ash.

Enough silence now even for Pa, I 'spect.

We never talked much around our house in Hay Springs, Nebraska, mostly 'cause Pa forbid what he called "idle gabbing," that is, conversations that wasn't absolutely necessary.

Myself, I guess I wouldn't have minded a bit more talk, but then Pa took up his carving hobby, and I figured we had words to spare, more words than I ever knew existed: long complicated words like fornication and serendipity stacked up on the mantel, peculiar words like quandary and abacus on the coffee table, chunky words like gash and brood stoppering the doors.

I never did know what most of 'em meant and Pa, he probably didn't either. He just found 'em in the dictionary and liked their shape and sound, figured they'd look right attractive on somebody's dressertop or what-not shelf.

Pa, you see, was a wordsmith. Not some wuss with nothin' better to do than peck out words on a typewriter or a computer, but a real wordsmith. He made words. In the shed back of the house, what I reckon

some people would call his studio, Pa carved words out of balsa and pine and cherry and other things besides.

It started soon after Pa came back from prison two years ago, when I'd just started tenth grade for the second time. Pa'd been a champion bull rider and calf roper during the years my older brother Josh and I was little, and he spent the best part of the year on the road. Then he got convicted of attempted murder after knifin' a rodeo clown that Pa claimed drove him half crazy singin' Gene Autry tunes all the time. When Pa got out of the joint after six and a half years, that was the end of his career on the rodeo circuit.

I guess maybe he developed a taste for silence in prison, though, 'cause after he come home, Pa started to complain that Ma talked too much. She was a "jabberjaw," as he put it, and Josh weren't much better; Pa called him a "yakkity-yak." Pa forbid Ma to say anything that wasn't absolutely necessary, which I always figured was why she communed with Jim Beam so often and so long. One night, though, after Ma'd threatened to leave Pa the first time some drinkin' buddy offered her a ticket out of town, she screamed, "If words was money, Ben Foley, you'd be the richest man in Nebraska, the way you miser every syllable away!"

Well, that musta' give Pa an idea. Next day he bought some wood and sharpened up the old carving knife he used for whittlin' back in his rodeo days and he started to carve out words.

At first Pa carved ordinary words-folks' names and a few inspirational words, but he tired of that real quick. He bought a dictionary and browsed in it for longer and more unusual words whose letters lent themselves to squiggles and corkscrews: long words and short ones, adverbs and nouns and adjectives, swear words and sex words (which he always carved small, but with a lot of fancy doodads), even a few foreign words-Himmel and merde and Kindertot are a few I recall.

Pa didn't just carve words, you see, he made works of art. He'd spend all afternoon curlicueing the ends of the "I's" in languid and lewdly and longitude or turning the "b" in betrothed into a fire-breathing serpent singeing its own tail.

The more Pa carved, the less he talked and the more he enforced the No Idle Chatter and No Speakin' Unless Spoke To rules. And Ma, she took to drinkin' in nearby towns like Rushville and Chadron, and sometimes didn't come home for days at a time. When she did straggle in, Pa wouldn't say nothin' at all, but from the door of his workshop he'd hurl a word at her-shu or bovine or perversity—as she teetered on up the walk with her hair teased like a bird's nest and her clothes rumpled and soiled.

And Ma'd retaliate by letting loose a stream of words fit to shame Old Nick himself.

"You daft old coot, you with your woodcarving, you got woodshavings for brains! Why can't you talk to me, holler or yell, like any normal man?"

But Pa'd just glare and pull his silence round him like a cloak and turn his back to her. By this time, Pa'd bought a router and an assort-

By this time, Pa'd bought a router and an assortment of attachable drill bits and cutters, so he could make his words bigger and more complex. Some of the letters stood two or three feet high, and the shed where Pa worked was so full up with words the walls looked like pages out of a dictionary.

Finally, I come in from school one day and saw he commenced to building something with the words. At first, I thought it was some kind of sign or joke or pun, but I soon realized the words stacked up in the backyard held no particular significance or sense. Thinble and histing and macaron formed part of the base with slurp and bereavement and a very highly ornamental clannish topping these and then some other words, short ones, on the third tier. Pa'd driven nails into the wood to hold the words together. The wall rose maybe four feet high then, at its tallest point, and stretched 'bout ten feet long.

Soon after the wall went up, my older brother Josh, who had a small farm of his own across the highway, stopped by the house one Saturday to ask me would I go with him to talk to Pa about what we referred to as "Ma's pasttime."

I agreed to go, but my heart was heavy . . . havin' a conversation with Pa was about as easy as gettin' milk out of a chicken.

But Josh was always better'n with words than I was and less afraid of Pa, too, him bein' older and livin' on his own.

"We gotta do somethin' about Ma," Josh said, standing there in the shed while Pa carved. "Put her in the hospital or something."

Pa was working on the tail of the "y" in chastity, and he finished it before he replied, which took a good ten minutes.

"A drunk tank?" he said finally.

"No sir, I was thinkin' more like a treatment center."

Pa carved on. Five minutes later, he said, "She's like the lot of y'all. You gab too much, fritter away your time. Jabberjaw and yakkity-yak, all day long."

He blew loose wood shavings off the letters.

"But Pa, I think '

He looked up, eyes hooded and hawkish, woodchips clinging to his beard like dark beetles. He stared at me, and I felt just like he'd turned the router on me and was drillin' out parts of my gut.

"How 'bout you, Billie-boy? You gonna have your say, too?"

I couldn't have admitted it then, not even to myself, but I was scared of Pa. He wielded silence like a club, and the few words that he ever spoke were more the kind that separate than those that might make bridges.

"No, Pa, I ain't got nothin' to say."

His eyes carved me up in sections, and I thought about that rodeo clown back in Denver and how many stitches they said it'd took to put his face back together.

"You goin' into town today?"

"Yessir."

He nodded, concentrating on the wood.

"Be long?"
"Few hours mebbe."

"Bring me back some Copenhagen . . . "

"Yessir."

"... and your Ma some whiskey."

"But Pa . . . I . . . "

Pa reached for his dictionary and opened it to choose another word. I peered over his shoulder and saw his long fingers pick out scrumptious.

"... about Ma, I think ... maybe"

But he wasn't listening anymore, and I knew if Josh and I stood there all day long, we'd get no discussion from him.

dr d

Not long after Josh tried to talk to Pa, Ma went out on a drunk, and didn't come back. I figured she'd turn up in a few days, like she always did, but when a week passed, I decided she musta' gone and done it, run off with some man who asked her like she'd been threaten' to do ever since Pa took up his carving. I didn't say nothin' about it, not even to Josh. I missed Ma, but I felt happy that she'd run away. For a while there, I had dreams of me and Ma together, in a fancy party at a big castle, where everyone talked and laughed about their hopes and dreams and fantasies, and the words just flowed all over each other, all rainbow-colored and glowing like fireworks in the dark.

I hoped wherever she'd run off to there'd be lots of people she could talk to.

Meantime, with Ma gone, Pa worked even harder.



The Wall of Words, as people had begun to call it, was getting higher, longer. Pa added elephantine and gargoyle and parsimonious, carved vertically like totem poles out of huge beams of wood with smaller words connecting them horizontally like in a crossword puzzle. People started taking notice from the road and dropping by to look around, but Pa wouldn't let them inside the shed no longer. He kept it locked, and hardly ever came out at all 'cept to take a piss and nail another word onto the Wall.

Meantime, the visitors that stopped by took pictures of each other by the Wall and let their kids crawl over it til finally Pa put up a fence around it and a sign saying Do Not Touch and Quiet Please.

Over the next few weeks, dozens of other words were added, obsequious and foreboding and juvenile, malcontent and kindness and advoitly, and the Wall just kept getting higher and longer, and some letters were as big as fireplugs and others fancied up with vines and buds and scrollwork, and Pa kept addin' to it, sometimes two or three words a day.

Josh stopped by my room one afternoon while I was laying there, having me a little sip of Scotch and daydreaming about Ma and me gossiping together at some fancy party. He was all fidgety and nervous and had that clenched jaw look he gets when he's been grindin' his teeth at night.

I stood up and offered Josh a pull from my bottle. but he just sneered and said, "Now that Ma's run off, you gonna be the family lush?"

"Helps me relax," I said, which was true. With enough booze in me, I could kinda float in and out of that grand, high society party in the castle where Ma and I drifted among high class nobility, with Ma chitchatting to her heart's content and me confiding my life story to a beautiful big-bosomed lady in a low-cut red gown like one I saw on some old pirate movie one time.

"Look, we got to talk," Josh said.

That made me uncomfortable. It's one thing to fantasize about somethin', another thing to do it. Josh knew we didn't talk in our family. That wasn't our way.

I shrugged. "bout what?" "The goddamn Wall."

"Yeah?"

"Have you looked at it lately? Since Pa put up the fence and started makin' it longer?"

"I glance at it from time to time."

"Some of those words, Billie . . . '

"Yeah?"

"I think . .

And we stood there, staring at the floor, the windows, everywhere but at each other, 'til I took another swig and lost my balance and plopped back on the bed, and Josh said, "Ya damn drunk . . . when you can see straight, just go take a look at the Wall."

"Where you goin'?" I said as he walked out the door.

"To talk to Pa," Josh said. And that was the last I seen of him.

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After that, it was hard to gauge how many days passed, cause most nights I'd drink and doze off or pass out maybe, and the sun would be comin' up and I'd haul my ass off to school, but like as not I wouldn't go at all. School was a lot like Pa's Wall . . . just words on top of words that made no sense, all meaningless and stupid.

But when I went by Josh's place sometime later to see would he lend me a few dollars to go buy some hooch and I seen Josh's truck was there but he wasn't anywheres around, I got a little worried. I knocked on the door of Pa's shed to ask if he'd seen Josh anywhere.

Pa unlocked the door and stood there, his big frame blocking my view of everything but one end of his workbench, where the router lay with a particularly vicious-looking cutter slotted into it.

"Josh?" said Pa. "Ain't seen him."

"Not this week?" "Naw"

"Stee P"

"Yep. He stopped by to talk." This surprised me. "bout what?"

Pa actually smiled, but on him it looked unnatural, the muscles at the corners of his mouth hunched up like the hind end of a rutting dog.

"He come by 'cause he got the idea he'd like to sign up with the rodeo fer a spell. I give him the names of some buddies of mine he could call up in Laramie and Denver. Told him they could help to get him started. He was all fired up about it. We sat up til past midnight with me tellin' him my stories. If he ain't been around of late, I reckon he done left to join the circuit. Reckon he'll do right fine, too. Takes after me, Josh does."

And Pa shut the door in my face.

It was the most words I'd ever heard Pa speak all at one time.

It got me to wonderin'.

That evening I studied the Wall, looking at the words that had been added since Ma disappeared. There was mercenary and idolater and spinnaker, and below that porous and euphonious and dozens of others, words of all shapes and sizes and different materials, and I noticed it then. The two long, light-colored words. Nearly white. Smaller than most and stuck into spaces between the bigger words that were carved out of pinewood and balsa.

There on the side of the Wall, I saw jabberjaw and a little ways from that was yakhiyyak. They was half hidden by some bigger words, but their paleness made them stand out real sharp.

I musta stared at them two words half an hour or more, running my fingers over each letter, learning their shape and their feel and trying to realize their meaning.

And when I thought I understood, I wrenched loose a word near the top that was carved out of teak, and I went lookin' for Pa.

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Words. In Mexico, where I'm headed, I'll hear them, but I won't understand. They'll fall over me like so much freezing rain.

And if I start to understand, I'll move on. To Japan or China maybe, anyplace where the words, to me, are nothin' more than decoration—singsong, meaningless sounds like birdcalls on a hot summer morning.

'Cause I can't go back to Hay Springs, Nebraska, never.

That new length of the Wall, the earth below it had been disturbed, dig up and then repacked before the words were piled on top. And them white words I found—jabberjaw and yakkity-yak—they was carved from bone.

And Pa? Well, right before I burned the Wall, I cornered him in that shed of his with all the bloodstains on the walls and I killed the silence-loving, murdering old bastard.

With kindness, right between the eyes.

- CD

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JOE R. LANSDALE & DAVID E. WEBB

TRASH THEATRE

Last time, due to a nasty accident, in which a would-be drive-in sneak-in lost his testicles to a snapping barb wire, we were forced to go overtime in describing the necessary emergency techniques used to, hopefully, have this guy's nussewn back on, and therefore lost valuable movie reviewing time. We're going to return now and pick right up where we started.

The rest of the movies are:

Viva Las Vegas, 1964 86 min.

Starring: Ehis Presley, Ann Margret, Jack Carter (Remember him from ... something. Hey, was this the *Maverick* guy or the shitty comedian with the same name?) William Demarest (Remember him from My Three Sons?)

Directed by: George Sidney

The Brain That Wouldn't Die, 1963 81 min.

Starring: Herb Evers, Virginia Leith, Adele Lamont, Leslie Daniel, Paula Maurice.

Directed by: Joseph Green Clam Bake (Goin' to uh, Clambake. Clambake.) 1967 97 min.

Starring: Big E, his own goddamn self. Shelly Fabares,

Will Hutchins (Remember him in Sugarfoot?) Bill Bixby (Remember him in The Hulk?)

Directed by: Arthur Nadel

It should be noted that we are writing this now in the cheery glow of a car fire, flaming two rows away. We thought at first a barbecue grill had gotten out of hand, perhaps too much gasoline tossed or an overly greasy pork chop that flamed up, but turns out an eye witness we talked to named Cletus, explained it like this.

"Well now, I was over'n that

well now, I was over I mat pickup right there. The one with the gun rack in the back and the hippie's skull on the hood ornament—Got that back in 1968. One shot. Right through the liver. Well, I was sittin' there and whenever the movie got borin', I'd take me peck over there, cause the way my truck is all jacked up. I could see what they was a doin', and it wasn't Baptist business, I can tell you that...'

To make his long, meander-

ing story short, seems Cletus was watching this gal with a bouffant hairdo, and she had her head bobbin' in the lap of this fella wearin' a Hawaiian shirt and polyester knits, and she was doing a sword swallowing act, and damn if she and this fella didn't get so worked up, he kicked a foot up and hit the lit skeeter coil on the dash and knocked it into her hairdo, which was ripe with Aqua Net hair spray. That dude went up like a dry wasp's nest, flames jumped to that ole boy's shirt, caught them polyester slacks on fire, speedily spread to them goddamn vinyl seat covers. and that was all she wrote. Damn car blazed like a rocket engine.

Anyway, that was the lead up, and by then, we were over there, and the car was a blazin', and hands and heads were pokin' out of the car-there were only two people in there—but they were poppin' from one side to the next so fast, trying' to get out, you'd have thought there were a dozen. It was Just horrible.

Someone yelled, "Kick some dirt on the fire," but there wasn't any available dirt. Just asphalt, so that didn't work. Some cold drinks were tossed, but that was like trying to put out the sun by pissin' on it.



David Webb

We were all frantic, then a fella yelled from the crowd.

"Whoa! This here car's got Yankee license plates. It's from Michigan."

A silence descended on the crowd, and they began to move back. A woman with a baby gently instructed everyone: "Back off. Let 'er burn."

Dave and Joe didn't share sentiments. We think Yan-kees are okay. Well, they're kinda okay. We don't mind some of them. Some of our best friends are Yankees. They're all right you don't associate with them, too much. Don't be seen with them. Well, they're all right in their place.

Anyway, them damn Yankees burned right up. They weren't watchin' the movies anyway.

Little later, on our way to the concession stand, we saw a sign spelled out in popcorn on the asphalt next to the charred hull of the automobile containing the burnt skeletons of the amorous Yankees. In bold popcorn letters someone had written a touching sentiment: WELCOME TO TEXAS, GOD-DAMNIT.

Anyway, this little distraction is soon forgotten when Elvis starts blatting "Viva Las Vegas" from 165 drive-in pole speakers.

In the background, back there in them cars and pickups, you can actually hear them blue haired cracker ladies sucking them

stretch pants up their cunts, they're so excited cause Elvis is on the screen. Lot of old fat peckerwood fellas ain't had a round of snatch since Elvis's Hawaiian special, are now getting their poles greased, and it's a sure thing the bulk of them peckerwoods will be purchasing Elvis's collected works on video and CD tomorrow at K-Mart, maybe combing what's left of their hair back and coloring it black, and splashing on that Elvis brand cologn on that Elvis brand cologn on that Elvis brand cologne.

So Elvis is on. His name in fourteen foot 1964 style gold glitter letters. The sucking of cunt flaps ceases in the background as we breathlessly await the moment when Elvis's voice hits right on target with that quintessential honkey attitude: "Gotta whole lot of money to burn, so get those stakes up higher! If I wind up broke, I'll know! had a swinging time."

You sec, Elvis, Big E, is a fiercely independent race car driver. He's on his way to L.A. to pick up an engine for his race car, but he gets idetracked by a girl. He sees her. He's hot for her. He doesn't know who she is, and she takes off not telling him, his sausage hanging in defeat in his trousers.

Course, we all know who that gal is. She's Ann Margret.

E goes to Las Vegas, and he wants this chick, as they like to refer to them in these movies. A term that designates something stupid and mindless, cute and fuzzy, which, in the case of this movie, is right on.

So Elvis, convinced this "groovy chick" is a show girl, goes from one Las Vegas club to the next in search of her. It's a search designed to treat the males in the audience to a bevy of big-butted show girl babes dressed in ostrich feathers and tank suits.

This part reminds us of the 1963 movie, The Brain That Wouldn't Die. (Well, it does remind us of it. Otherwise, do you think we would have bothered to mention it?) Part where this doctor's good-looking girlfriend gets her head pinched off in a car wreck, and he wraps her head in a rag, and runs like a scalded-assed ape to his lab, and wires that sucker up to some tubes and wires and an Everyready.

This keeps the head fresh. (Try this with a deceased pet, and let us know how it comes out, will you?) And while it's kept that way, Doc goes out in search of a new body for his Everyready Bunny's head. He goes from club to club (see the connection now?) eyeing female butts, babes in tank suits, looking for just the right one to his sugar doodle back at the lab.

This, of course, causes some problems. People really don't want their heads cut off, no matter how much Doc loves his babycums. Tragedy ensues. The head is unhappy. The Doc's plans to acquire bodies turns into a mess, so it ends up the Doc's sex life is ruined, and all he can get from now on is, you guessed it, a little head.

But that's enough. What's most important about The Brain That Wouldn't Die is you shouldn't confuse it with The Brain That Couldn't Die or The Brain That Shouldn't Die (wait a minute, did wanke that up?) or even, They Sawd Hitler's Brain, which has got to be one of the worst movies made since film was invented, next to a couple of episodes of Barney the Fucking Purple Dinosaur.

And, there's The Brain from Planet Arous, and there are brains with spinal cords that strangle people in Fiend Without A Face and turn to shiftly oatmeal when they get a .45 slug through the grey matter. There's also Donovan's Brain, The Man With Two Brains, and one we here at Trash Theater are financing called, That Brain Ain't Conna Fuckin' Die.

And that just touches the surface on Brain movies, something we hope to do a column on eventually.

Right now we're working on an Insect Fear column, written around a trip to The Philbert, Texas Fire Ant festival, but that's going to be in a chapbook, and you ain't gonna see it unless you buy it from Crossroads Press come Spring of 94, cause it ain't gonna be here in Cemetery Dance, brothers and sisters. It will come with drawings too, but we don't know who the artist is. We've got enough to worry about just putting our notes together on the Fire Ant Festival and trying to heal our ant bite wounds, which have lingered.

But, we don't believe in advertising our stuff, especially in our column, so, the less said about the chapbook, the better.

Crossroads Press address is: P.O. Box 10433, Holyoke, Ma. 01041-1833.

We sincerely doubt anything

would happen to you should you not purchase this forty to fifty page chapbook, but we just want to say now, and up front, we don't want to be responsible if something does. I mean, these things happen.

Remember, that's Crossroad's Press: A Nest of Fear, or, Trash Theater Goes to the Fire Ant Festival. Anyway, this really isn't the time or place for that, and since that is not our way, to advertise shamelessly, we'll move on.

(Remember: Crossroads Press. A Nest of Fear)

But anyway, this Elvis movie, it's like these Vegas gals could have been the same show girls. Maybe we could re-edit this, you know, splice in the Elvis movie with *The Brain That Wouldn't Die.*

I mean, if that Doc had found Ann Margret, he just might have turned off the electricity to sugar doodle's head back at the lab, and keep Ann Margret, head and all.

But say we put Elvis in the Doc's part. You know, a race car driver, and he wrecks, and he's got Ann Margret in the car with him, and she gets her head cut off, and Elvis, being the kinda guy he is, just throws the head away. Keeps the body. Maybe doesn't even want a head on it. Just cauterizes the neck. Hot wires the decapitated corpse to a car battery with jumper cables, least when they have sex he does this, and then we got us a serious movie,

something with a

little existential

angst. Like, does it really matter if your mate has a head or not, that kind of thing. Something about what men with IQs of 3 really want. Call it, Viva, The Vegas Honey Hole That Wouldn't Die.

It could be a hit.

But as for the movie of record, Viva Las Vegas, Elvis, he's searching for Ann Margret. He goes from place to place, even to a room full of-and we find this hard to believe-obnoxious Texas tourists. Elvis takes care of this. Like a pied piper, he sings "The Eyes of Texas Are Up On You", and the Texans, mesmerized, follow him out to a flathed truck, and he has them hauled to the dump.

Finally, he finds Ann Margret. She's not just your normal bimbo here. She's a swim instructorsinger-dancer, and she steals the show when she struts her stuff wearing some yeller knit hot pants that are so tight, when she wallsher clam looks like its chewing bub-



Joe R. Lansdale

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Course, it was even more interesting where we were sitting, upunder the big tin corrugated screen. That way, at times, when she walked just right, her clam stood out above us in bold 3-D relief, causing Joe to faint and horns to blow and random gunfire to go off from an assortment of pistols and deer rifles brought in by the crowd.

At this point, the plot, which stands on spindly toothpick legs to begin with, starts to evaporate. Having stunned the male audience with her protruding, mutant, fleshy article, which is the whole point of Ann Margret's presence in this movie, and if this sounds Male Chauvinist, well, fuck you, because this is an exploitation film, and we know it, and we know stupid when we see it, even if you don't. And if you do, we like you lots. And we're also males and don't mind looking at pussy. There. We've said it up front

So, the male audience is stunned by Ann, and the female audience have Ehis to look at, and he's got tight pants too, not that we care, and we're assaulted by some musical numbers with all the depth and artistic beauty of a colored light wheel flashing on a foil Christmas tree.

(In fact, there's an album of this stuff, the worst of Elvis, mostly from the movies, maybe all of it from the movies, called *Elvis's Greatest Shit*.

No shit.)

Anyway, everyone wanders around for a while. There's a car race, and guess what, Elvis loses!!!!

Just kidding.

He wins, of course.

Be sure and notice the force field he has over his car which keeps the wind from mussing his hair. Either that, or he's got the goldangest brand of gel and hair spray this side of Essence of Tar Pit. "Clambake. Clambake. We're gonna have a Clambake!"

We got to admit the title threw us. We thought this was an In-And-Out movie, but it ain't. It's an Elvis flick.

After a few seconds of pouting, however, we got into it.

"Clambake. Clambake. We're gonna have a Clambake!"

We just can't stop hummin't his little number. I mean, it kicks poodle ass with shitty and twangy studio guitar solos, and it's backed up by perky whitebread trumpets that sound a little like a one-lunged smoker blowing through a cardboard toilet paper roller.

Elvis also performs several sognoss where he glorifies mollusks and crustaceans. Long before *The Little Mermaid*, and the singing crab, Sebastian, Elvis was doing his tribute to the denizens of the sea.

There's "Song of the Shrimp,"

1962, a real toe tapper.

"Do the Clam," 1965, something that'll really get you off your ass.

And, of course, "Clam Bake," 1967.

According to what we've read, this was quite a stretch for Evis, who (if Brenda Arlene Buller the author of Arv You Hungry Tonight. Elvis's Favorite Recipes, can be accepted as gospel concerning his culinary delights) didn't even like sea food.

About the only thing close to seafood Elvis might have enjoyed, or desired to enjoy, was the tuna he dove in on, wrapped in white cotton pull-ups.

By the way, Are You Hungry Tonight, from Gramercy Books, shows us why Elvis had a weight problem later in life, and checked out early. Drugs didn't help him any, but considering this boy thought a meal wasn't complete unless it could be wrung out to deliver enough grease to comb and plaster down an unruly head of hair, it's amazing he lived as long as he did. If it wasn't fried or full of sugar, he didn't much care for it. Well, not entirely true. The fact that he did eat vegetables is also revealed in the book. Under a special heading: Vegetables—Yes, The King Ate Vegetables.

When it has to be pointed out like that, you got to have your doubts about how many of them good healthy vegetables he ate. Considering these vegetables include such fine, but fattening foods as Heavenly Mashed Potatoes, Mustard Greens and Potatoes, Southern Style, and Butter-Baked Sweet Potatoes, maybe he'd been doing about as good having a fried peanut butter and banana sandwich. Which, of course, he often had, referring to it as a peanut butter and 'nanner sandwich. You eat a couple of these babies back to back, your blood pressure's gonna go up so high your balls will swell up. If you're a lady, we're not sure what swells, but something will.

They sound pretty good, though.

Clam Bake opens with Elvis tooling down the road—he's always tooling—in a fabulous custom Vette. He's got that force field around him again. His hair don't move, no matter how fast the scenery on the back screen whizzes by. He wears a cowboy hat sometimes, and it won't blow off neither. That sonofabitch is welded to his head, even when he tops out at 80 miles an hour.

In this one, Elvis plays a guy named Duster Heyward. Seems this poor Duster feller has too much of his Dad's money, and he is just fed up with it. This money is pissing him off. People don't take him serious. His hair doesn't blow. His cowboy hat stays on. And he's a chemical engineer with plans.

No sir, he's a walking, talking bank account. Nothing more. He's so pissed off about it, that in a kind of play on *The Prince and* Pauper (Elvis's literary nod to Mark Twain), he trades places with a "regular guy"—played as a goofy asshole water ski instructor by Will Hutchins—and sets out for a zany reality check.

The Regular Guy Asshole heads for Miami in Duster's ride, and Duster goes off on Regular Guy Asshole's Harley, complete with saddle bags. He hits the same hotel where Regular Guy Asshole is supposed to show up, and takes over his life as the new water ski instructor.

Now a new plot angle, as elusays as wamp gas, wavers into sight. Shelly Fabares is a gold digger on holiday. She wants to meet someone and marry them for money. But she meets Duster, and goddamn, if she doesn't fall for the big no-money lug.

Spot the irony here?

Silly Shelly tries to just stay pals with Ebvis. One time, while they're taking a cruise on the Regular Guy Asshole's Harley, riding along the beach, Shelly confides to Duster that she has a desire to marry a sugar daddy, and Duster says he'll help her bag one. (We don't remember much about this part of the plot. Seems like she meets someone with money, or something. Frankly, we don't care and we're not watching it again.)

Needless to say, they have a perfectly safe afternoon where Elvis, in another moment of poignant, crushing irony, sings Shelly a song about a sad girl who marries for money, not love.

There's a race in this movie too. A boat race. Seems Duster, that clever shit, has developed a super hard varnish in his dad's lab, and needs to prove that it works. He comes up with this only 24 hours before the big race. (You following this?)

Anyway, he whips up a batch, and a bunch of babes show up to have a twist and varnish the boat party. It's fun and games. Only thing, if the varnish isn't perfect, the boat will self-destruct.

And it's never been tested. Tension crackles in the air like an ignorant lineman straddling a 4,000 volt power line.

Personally, we had invented this, and were worrying about it self-destructing, we'd skip that race, or maybe talk Neal Barrett into driving the boat. Tell him it's okay, or something.

What we might try is putting the varnish on our dicks (Why doesn't that surprise you?) or have the bimbos do it. The varnish worked, made things hard, think of all the money you could make with it as a marital aid. Talk about a woody....

Meanwhile, we get to attend a cool clam bake party, and it's complete with bongos, twistin' hip huggers with hips in them, and of course, the sacred Baking of the Clam.

Time for the big race, and the suspense builds like a stack of boiled rice kernels. But not to worry, Duster's boat stays in one piece—which is a disappointment—and he wins the race. Meanwhile, Shelly, that silly girl, has come around and decided she'd rather fall for Duster, the water ski instructor.

Imagine her goddamn surprise when he says he is Duster Heyward, and has lots of Dad's money. She just passes smooth out from shock and happiness.

> And so do we. Numbing.

What's the snack on this one? A greasy cheeseburger with lots of cheese. No ketchup, as that would make it a Yankee burger, and the King, he didn't eat no Yankee burgers. Make it with lettuce and pickle, sliced 'maters, sliced red onions, mustard and mayonnaise or salad dressing.

Maybe that fried peanut butter and 'nanner sandwich would be even more appropriate. That was Elvis's signature meal.

This is our end of the year column, coming to you at the first of the New Year, so, a belated Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

The ballots are in. The decision for placing the Canned Yam is about to be made.

And, the envelope please.

And, the winner is, Rush Limbaugh, the Honkey Guru, the conservative Jerry Rubin of the 90s, whose cracker minions follow mindlessly in his wake, and it's a big wake, as he seems to have Elvis's former chef.

Recently, Rush criticized Nacogdoches on his radio show as being populated by nothing other than a bunch of stupid, uneducated crackers. We know this, but we don't like to hear it from him.

Actually, Nacogdoches is just like any other place in the world. It's mostly stupid, but it ain't all stupid, and where the hell does Rush "Fat Ass" Limbaugh get off calling Nacogdoches stupid merely because someone from here disagreed with him.

We'd also hope Rush would share his award with his followers here who make us want to fucking throw up. Maybe he could drive it up his ass for a day or so, then he could pass it around, then he could get it back up his ass later.

So Rush, from Trash Theater, the Canned Yam Award, and up your ass!

Footnote:

* Well, it's our column, and if we say bimbos would varnish our dicks, then they'd varnish our dicks. We are celebrities, after all.

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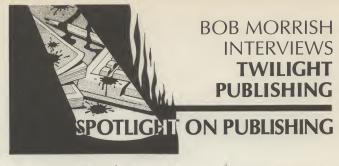
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The "old blood" of the horror small press is getting tired. New blood is needed.

With some relatively longtime specialty publishers—such as Whispers Press, Phantasia Press, and Scream/Press—on indefinite hiatus (or worse), and other presses—such as Arkham House, Donald Grant, and Dark Harvest increasingly trying their hand with books outside the genre, there's a definite need for some new presses to fill the gaps.

One of the publishers filling that call for new blood is Twilight Publishing. Twilight is the product of husband and wife team Wayne and Darlene Decker, who run the press out of their home in New Jersey. Twilight debuted in 1993, with the publication of Matthew Costello's Garden, a novella-length sequel to his mass market paperback novel Wurm. With their first book under their belts, the Deckers are preparing for the May 1994 release of their first novel, Joseph Citro's Deus-X. In this issue's installment of Spotlight on Publishing, the Deckers discuss the creation of Twilight Publishing, and their plans for the future.

CEMETERY DANCE: Tell us a little about your background and how you decided to get involved in specialty publishing.

DARLENE: Well, we're both printers, and we both really like books. We started collecting books about five years ago . . . that kind of started with Wayne . . .

WAYNE: I've always been an avid reader of horror and science fiction. When I heard about (the Lord John limited edition of] Dohar's Cadillac, that's really when I started to find out about these smaller publishers. That's where we started getting into collecting



limited editions and . . . we met a guy at a Fangoria convention in New York, a guy named Craig Goden who runs *Time Tunnel* books. It turned out he only lived

about five miles away from us, so we started going over to his house and . . . spending lots of money. He told us about the Necon convention up in New England, and we went to the 10th anniversary convention there. While we were there, we listened to a lot of authors talk about . . how much they hated publishers.

Right around that time, the company that I had worked for for twenty-two years went under, and ... we thought about selling books, becoming a book dealer, but we decided that we didn't want to do that. So... we thought that the next best thing would be to try and publish a book. We told Craig that we were thinking about trying it and then ... at a ChillerCon convention here in New Jersey, we met Matt Costello. Craig had told him that we were thinking about publishing ...

DARLENE: So we just started talking to him about it. We figured that since we were printers, we at least knew half of what we needed to know. And that's kind of how it all started.

CD: Do you both have day jobs

DARLENE: Oh, yes. We have to

in order to support our publishing habit.

CD: How do you split the duties of Twilight Publishing between the two of you?



WAYNE: When one of us gets lazy, the other one pushes them—and we've both gotten lazy at times.

DARLENE: It depends on who makes the first contact with someone—whoever makes that first contact winds up following through on it. We kind of both do everything.

CD: You mentioned Dolan's Cadillac-were there particular small press publishers whose work you especially admired?

WAYNE: I really like the work that Charnel House and Lord John have done. And there are some others—that I wouldn't want to mention by name—who I think have done horrible work.

DARLENE: Which is also one of the reasons that we got into [publishing]—because we knew that we could put out a nicer product than some of [the other publishers] were doing. For the amount of money that you spend for some of these limited editions, the product you get—not the written product, but the physical one—isn't always satisfying.

CD: You mentioned meeting Matt Costello at ChillerCon—as I recall, there's an interesting story about how you came to acquire Garden, a story that involves F. Paul Wilson. Tell us how that came about.

WAYNE: I had just finished Matt's novel midsummer, and I was picking up Wurm while I was there talking to him fact Conl. He told me that F. Paul Wilson had called him after reading it, and said he wanted more. So Matt was tossing around the

idea of maybe following it up with a novella, but nothing had been decided yet. So... I bought the book there, and after I had read it, that's when we decided to contact Matt and ask him if he still wanted to do it. That's really how Twilight was born.

DARLENE: And then at Necon, we talked to F. Paul Wilson and asked him if he would write the introduction, since he had been instrumental in getting Matt to think about doing a sequel in the first place.

CD: So right from the beginning, Costello had planned for *Garden* to be novella length?

WAYNE: He had specifically mentioned a novella, and then when we got to-

gether, he asked us how many words we'd want, and we figured that since this was our first book, we'd try something a little bit smaller, instead of a full-length novel. Although I kind of would have liked to have had more, since I really liked the story.

DARLENE: Afterward, he said

that he could have given us more. Matt's pretty much of a technician, and he could have worked the story to whatever length we wanted.

CD: You published three different editions of *Garden*. Could you briefly describe each edition and give us the print runs for each?

DARLENE: There was a trade paperback, of which we did 1,950. Then we did a clothbound, numbered edition of \$50, and a 26-copy lettered, leatherbound edition with worms embossed on the cover.

CiD: Some people might think that that's a lot of copies for a specialty press to be doing, especially for their first book. How has the book sold for you, and if you had to do it over again, would you alter the size of the print runs?

WAYNE: I think I like the size of the print run. It hasn't sold out, but I think that's largely because we didn't have a big advertising budget . . . we also don't have a distributor yet. We've tried to get a distributor for that book, but



we've had a hard time. We seem to be having better luck for our next book, *Deus-X*. We also have a much larger advertising budget for *Deus-X*—and we're going to advertise the Costello book some more.

DARLENE: For the amount of advertising we did, I think [Garden] did all right. Like I said, we're

printers and we know how to produce a book, but it's the marketing end of things that we're . . . learning.

CD: As you've mentioned, your next book is scheduled to be *Deus-X*, a novel by Joe Citro. What can you tell us about that book?

WAYNE: It's an original novel that was scheduled to be published by Warner, where it was part of a three or four book deal that Joe had there. I'm not clear on the details, but I think... his editor left Warner and the book was just shelved. The book was originally supposed to come out . . . last lanuary, I think—over a year ago.

DARLENE: Whoever took his editor's place came in and obviously didn't read the book and just let it sit. Joe was pretty upset about it, and he wound up buying the rights back. It was about at that point when we heard from Craig Goden that Joe had a book that was available.

WAYNE: [The book] is being illustrated by Steve Bissette and... we're going to be publishing 2,000 copies of a trade hardcover, priced at \$25, and a 125-copy limited edition, priced at \$65.

CD: What will distinguish the

limited edition from the trade?

DARLENE: There's the signature page, nicer binding... [the book] will probably be boxed... and there will be additional artwork on the signature page.

CD: How did you decide upon Bissette for the illustrations?

WAYNE: He's a friend of Joe's, and he had talked to Joe about wanting to illustrate it, if Joe had it done by a small press. One of the things we try to do-like I said, when we first went up to Necon, we heard all these authors bitching about their publishers—we try to work with the authors a little bit, and give them a little more input. Matt didn't really care who we go to do the illustrations [for Garden], whereas Joe has taken a lot more interest, and he's working with Bissette.

CD: Speaking of the Costello book, the cover artist for that book

DARLENE: Stephen Honthy, a newcomer. He was still in school at the time. We saw a portfolio of his stuff, and liked it, and thought we'd give him a chance.

CD: Getting back to Deus-X, can you give us a brief plot summary?

DARLENE: That's tough. In the first fifty pages, you don't know whether you're reading about UPOs, religious phenomena, government conspiracy, possession... everything is involved. At one point, the book had the sub-title "the reality conspiracy." It's tough to try to summarize it... we could read you the jacket copy...

"Beginning as a mystery, we witness two seemingly unrelated events: in a secret California government installation, a political prisoner is grotesquely executed; and on the East Coast, an elderly Vermont farmer vanishes, victim of an other-worldly abduction. Three amateur investigators-a psychologist, a physicist, and a priest-join forces, sharing divergent world views to discover the relationship between the two dissimilar events. They're stalked by a murderous psychopath bent on stopping them. They encounter UFOs, bizarre religious phenomena, multiple personalities, and overwhelming psychic violence."

It goes on a little longer, but that gives you a flavor for it.

CD: Between publishing Costello and Citro—and your own New Jersey location—your book line is taking on a distinctly "Northeastern" flavor. Is that by design or accident?



WAYNE: By accident. It's mostly been because... Matt and Joe are among the people we've met at conventions in our part of the country.

CD: What do you have planned after the Citro book?

DARLENE: Nothing definite. We've been talking to Ed Gorman and Rick Hautala...

WAYNE: We'd really love to do something by Jack Ketchum also. We really liked The Off Season, and The Girl Next Door is very good. So we've been talking to him about doing something. We were thinking of doing a limited edition that ... would include both The Off

Season and Offspring, but we've heard that reprints of paperbacks almost never sell well.

Cib: It's sometimes the case that authors who write an introduction for a small press book will go on to have their own book published by the same press—in that regard, have you queried F. Paul Wilson about publishing something by him?

DARLENE: That would be real nice.

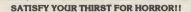
WAYNE: We haven't yet, but we plan to. We'd really like to do one of his books. We're taking it kind of slow for now, one step at a time. We want to get *Deus-X* out there and hopefully make some money.

Then we'll see what happens . . . we'd like to do more than one book a year, but right now that's the way it is.

CD: What are your grandest aspirations for Twilight?

WAYNE: I'd like to quit my day job. We'd both love to be able to make a living from this, but everyone we've talked to has said it's not an easy proposition.

DARLENE: Right now, with the jobs we have, it would be nice if at least Wayne could quit his job to [do Twilight work full-time]. I'm in a job that I can deal with; he's really not.



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DOUGLAS CLEGG is the author of several popular horror novels and many short stories. Look for upcoming appearances in Ellen Datlow's Little Deaths and Poppy Z. Brite's and Martin Greenberg's Love In Vein. His next novel, Dark of the Eye, is due late this summer from Pocket Books.

1

"We're gonna die someday." Thalia said, "all of us. Mama and Daddy and then you and then me. I wonder if anyone's gonna care enough to think about Thalia Inez Canty, or if I'll just be dust under their feet." She stood in the doorway, still holding the ladle that dripped with potato chowder.

Her brother was raking dried grass over the manure in the yard. "What the heck kind of thing's that supposed to mean?"

"Something died last night," Thalia sniffed the air "Can smell it. Out in the sty. Smelt it all night long, whatever it is. Always me that's first to smell the dead. "Member the eat, the one by the thresher? I know when things's dead. I can smell something new that's dead, just like that. Made me think of how everything ends."

"We'll check your stink out later. All you need to think about right now is getting your little bottom back inside that house to stir the soup so's we'll have something decent come suppertime." Her brother returned to his work; and she to hers. She hoped that one day she would have a real job and be able to get away from this corner of low sky and deadland.

The year was 1934, and there weren't too many jobs in Moncure County, when Thalia Canty was eleven, so her father went off to Dowery, eighty miles to the northeast, to work in an accountant's office, and her mother kept the books at the Bowand Motel on Fourth Street, night shift. Daddy was home on weekends, and Mama slept through the day, got up at noon, was out the door by four, and back in bed come three a.m. It was up to Thalia's brother, Lucius, to run the house, and make sure the two of them fed the pigs and

chickens, and kept the doors bolted so the windsthey'd come up suddenly in March-didn't pull them off their hinges. There was school, too, but it seemed a tiny part of the day, at least to Thalia, for the work of the house seemed to slow the hours down until the gray Oklahoma sky was like an hour-glass that never emptied of sand. Lucius was a hard-worker, and since he was fifteen, he did most of the heavy moving, but she was always with him, cleaning, tossing feed to the chickens, picking persimmons from the neighbor's yard (out back by the stable where no one could see) to bake in a pie. And it was on the occasion of going to check on the old sow, that Thalia and her brother eventually came face to face with the Rendering Man.

The pig was dead, and already drawing flies. Evening was coming on strong and windy, a southern wind which meant the smell of the animal would come right in through the cracks in the walls. Lucius said, "She been dead a good long time. Look at her snout."

"Toldja I smelled her last night." Thalia peeked around him; scrunched back, wanting to hide in his lengthening shadow. The snout had been torn atbood caked around the mouth. "Musta been them yaller dogs," she said, imitating her father's strong southern accent, "cain't even leave her alone when she's dead."

The pig was enormous, and although Lucius thrust planks beneath her to try and move her a ways, she wouldn't budge. "Won't be taking her to the butcher, I reckon," he said.

Thalia smirked. "Worthless yaller dogs." "Didn't like bacon, anyways."

"Me, too. Or ham."

"Or sausage with biscuits and grease."

"Chitlins. Hated chitlins. Hated knuckles. Couldn't chaw a knuckle to save my life."

"Ribs. Made me sick, thought a ribs all drownin' in molasses and chili, drippin' over the barbeque pit," Lucius said, and then drew his hat down, practically making the sign of the cross on his chest. "Oh, Lord, what I wouldn't give for some of her."

Thalia whispered, "Just a piece of skin fried up in the skillet."

"All hairy and crisp, greasy and smelly."

"Yes," Thalia sighed. "Praise the Lord, yes. Like to melt in my mouth right now. I'd even eat her all rotten like that. Maybe not."

The old sow lay there, flies making haloes around her face.

Thalia felt the familiar hunger come on; it wasn't that they didn't have food regularly, it was that they rarely ate the meat they raised—they'd sold the cows off, and the pigs were always for the butcher and the local price so that they could afford other things. Usually they had beans and rice or eggs and griddle cakes. The only meat they ever seemed to eat was chicken, and Thalia could smell chicken in her dreams sometimes, and didn't think she'd ever get the sour taste out of her throat.

She wanted to eat that pig. Cut it up, hocks, head, ribs, all of it. She would've liked to take a chaw on the knuckle.

knuckle.

"She ain't worth a nickel now," Thalia said, then, brightening, "you sure we can't eat her?"

Lucius shook his head. "For all we know she's been out here six, seven hours. Look at those flies. Already laid eggs in her ears. Even the dogs didn't go much into her-look, see? They left off. Somethin' was wrong." He shuffled over to his sister and dropped his arm around her shoulder. She pressed her head into the warmth of his side. Sometimes he was like a mama and daddy, both, to her.

"She was old. I guess. Even pigs die when they get old." Thalia didn't want to believe that Death, which had come for Granny three years before, could possibly want a pig unless it had been properly slaughtered and divvied up.

"Maybe it died natural. Or maybe," and her brother looked down the road to the Leavon place. There was a wind that came down from the sloping hillside, sometimes, and coughed dust across the road between their place and the old widow's. "Could be she was poisoned."

Thalia glanced down to the old gray house with its flag in front, still out from Armistice Day, year before last. A witch lived in that house, they called her the Grass Widow because she entertained men like she was running a roadhouse; she lived alone, though, with her eighteen cats as company. Thalia knew that the Grass Widow had wanted to buy the old sow for the past two years, but her parents had refused because she wasn't offering enough money and the Cantys were raising her to be the biggest, most expensive hog in the county. And now, what was the purpose? The sow was fly-ridden and rotting. Worthless. Didn't matter if the Grass Widow killed it or not. It recalled for her a saying her daddy often said in moments like this:

"How the mighty are fallen." Even among the kingdom of pigs. Lucius pulled her closer to him, and leaned down a bit to whisper in her ear. "I ain't sayin' anything. Thay, but the Widow wanted that sow and she knew Daddy wasn't never gonna sell it to her. I heard she hexed the Horleich's cows so they dried up."

"Ain't no witches," Thalia said, disturbed by her brother's suspicions. "Just fairy tales, that's what Mama says."

"And the Bible says there is. And since the Bible's the only book ever written with truth in it, you better believe there's witches, and they're just like her, mean and vengeful and working hexes on anything they covet." Luclus put his hand across his sister's shoulder, and hugged her in close to him again. He kissed her gently on her forehead, right above her small red birthmark. "Don't you be scared of her, though, Thay, we're God-fearin' people, and she can't hurt us 'less we shut out our lights under bushels."

Thalia knew her brother well enough to know he never lied. So, the old Grass Widow was a witch. She looked at her brother, then back to the pig. "We gonna bury her?"

"The sow? Naw, too much work. Let's get it in the wheelbarrow and take it around near the coops. Stinks so bad, nobody's gonna notice a dead pig, and then when Mama gets home in the mornin', I'll take the truck. We can drive the sow out to the renderin' man." This seemed a good plan, because Thalia knew that the Rendering Man could give them something in exchange for the carcass-if not money, then some other service or work. The Rendering Man had come by some time back for the old horse, Dinah, sick on her feet and worthless. He took Dinah into his factory, and gave Thalia's father three dollars and two smoked hams. She was aware that the Rendering Man had a great love for animals, both dead and alive, for he paid money for them regardless. He was a tall, thin man with a pot belly, and a grin like walrus, two teeth thrusting down on either side of his lip. He always had red cheeks, like Santa Claus, and told her he knew magic. She had asked him (when she was younger), "What kind of magic?"

He had said, "The kind where you give me something, and I turn it into something else." Then he showed her his wallet. She felt it. He'd said, "It used to be a snake." She drew her hand back; looked at the wallet; at the Rendering Man; at the wallet; at her hand. She'd only been six or seven then, but she knew that the Rendering Man was someone powerful.

If anyone could help with the dead sow, he could.

₹ 1

The next morning was cool and the sky was fretted with strips of clouds. Thalia had to tear off her apron as she raced from the house to climb up beside Lucius in the truck. "I didn't know you's gonna take off so quick," she panted, slamming the truck door shut beside her. "I barely got the dishes done."

"Got to get the old sow to the Rendering Man, or we may as well just open a bottle-neck fly circus out back."

Thalia glanced in the back; the sow lay there peacefully, so different than its brutal, nasty dumb animal life when it would attack anything that came in its pen. It was much nicer dead. "What's it anyways?" she asked.

"Thay, honey?"
"Renderin'."

"Oh," Lucius laughed, turning down the Post Road, "it's taking animals and things and turning them into something else."

"Witchcraft's like that "

"Naw, not like that. This is natural. You take the pig, say, and you put it in a big pot of boiling water, and the bones, see, they go over here, and the skin goes over there, and then, over there's the fat. Why you think they call a football a pigskin?"

Thalia's eyes widened. "Oh my goodness."

"And hog bristle brushes—they get those from renderin'. And what else? Maybe the fat can be used for greasing something, maybe "

"Goodness sakes," Thalia said, imitating her mother's voice. "I had no idea. And he pays good money for this, does he?"

"Any money on a dead sow's been eaten by maggots's good money, Thay."

It struck her, what happened to the old horse.
"He kill Dinah, too? Dinah got turned into fat and
bones and skin and guts even whilst she was alive?
Somebody use her fat to grease up their wheels?"

Lucius said nothing; he whistled faintly.

She felt tears threatening to bust out of her eyes. She held them back. She had loved that old horse, had seen it as a friend. Her father had lied to her about what happened to Dinah; he had said that she just went to retire in greener pastures out behind the Rendering Man's place.

She took a swallow of air. "I wished somebody'd told me so I coulda said a proper goodbye."

"My strong, brave little sister," Lucius said, and brought the truck to an abrupt stop. "Here we are." Then, he turned to her, cupping her chin in his hand the way her father did whenever she needed talking to. "Death ain' to had for those that die, remember, it's only bad for the rest of us. We got to suffer and carry on. The Dead, they get to be at peace in the arms of the Lord. Don't ever cry for the Dead, Thay, better let them cry for us." He brought his hand back down to his side. "See, the Rendering Man's just sort of a part of Nature. He takes all God's creatures and makes sure their suffering is over, but makes them useful, even so."

"I don't care about the sow," she said. "Rendering Man can do what he likes with it. I just wish we coulda et it." She tried to hide her tears; sniffed them back; it wasn't just her horse Dinah, or the sow, but something about her own flesh that bothered her, as if she and the sow could be in the same spot one day, rendered, and she didn't like that idea.

The Rendering Man's place was made of stone, and was like a fruit crate turned upside down—flat on top, with slits for windows. There were two big smoke stacks rising up from behind it like insect feelers; yellow-black smoke rose up from one of them discoloring the sky and making a stink in the general vicinity. Somebody's old mule was tied to a skinny tree in the front yard. Som to be rendered, Thalia thought. Poor thing. She got out of the truck and walked around to pet it. The mule was old; its face was almost white, and made her think of her granny, all white of hair and skin at the end of her life.

The Rendering Man had a wife with yellow hair like summer wheat; she stood in the front doorway with a large apron that had once been white, now filthy, covering her enormous German thighs tight as skin across a drum. "Guten tag," the lady said, and she came out and scooped Thalia into her arms like she was a tin angel, smothered her scalp with kisses. "Ach, mein leibchen. You are grown so tall. Last I saw you, you was barely over with the cradle."

Just guessing as to what might be smeared on the woman's apron made Thalia slip through her arms again so that no dead animal bits would touch her. "Hello, ma'am," she said in her most formal voice.

The lady looked at her brother. "Herr Lucius, you are very grown. How is your mutter?"

"Just fine, ma'am," Lucius said, "we got the old sow in the back." He rapped on the side of the truck. "Just went last night. No good eating. Thought you might be interested."

"Ach, da, yes, of naturally we are," she said, "come in, come in, children, Father is still at the table mit breakfast. You will have some ham? Fresh milk and butter, too. Little Thalia, you are so thin, we must put some fat on those bones," and the Rendering Man's wife led them down the narrow hall to the kitchen. The kitchen table was small, which made its crowded plates seem all the more enormous: fried eggs on one, on another long fat sausages tied with ribbon at the end, then there were dishes of bread and jam and butter. Thalia's eyes were about to burst just taking it all in-slices of fat-laced ham, jewels of sweets in a brightly painted plate, and two pitchers, one full of thick milk, and the other, crange juice.

The Rendering Man sat in a chair, a napkin tucked into his collar. He had a scar on the left side of his face, as if an animal had scratched him deeply there. Grease had dripped down his chin and along his neck.



He had his usual grin and sparkle to his eyes. "Well, my young friends. You've brought me something, have you?"

His wife put her hand over her left breast like she was about to faint, her eyes rolling to the back of her head, "Ach, a great pig, shotzi. They will want more than just the usual payment for that one."

Thalia asked, "Can I have a piece of ham please?"
The Rendering Man patted the place beside him.

The Rendering Man patted the place beside him. "Sit with me, both of you, yes, Eva, bring another chair. We will talk business over a good meal, won't we, Lucius? And you, sweet little bird, you must try my wife's elegant pastries. She learned how to make them in her home country, they are so light and delicate, like the sun-dried skin of a dove, but I scare you, my little bird, it is not a dove, it is bread and sugar and butter!"

After she'd eaten her fill, ignoring the conversation between her brother and the Rendering Man, Thalia asked, "How come you pay good money for dead animals. Mister?"

He drank from a large mug of coffee, wiped his lips, glanced at her brother, then at her. "Even dead, we are worth something, little bird."

"I know that. Lucius told me about the fat and bones and whiskers. But folks'd dump those animals for free. Why you pay money for them?"

The Rendering Man looked at his wife, and they both laughed. "Maybe I'm a terrible businessman," he said, shaking his head. "But," he calmed, "you see, my pet, I can sell these things for more money than I pay. I am not the only man capable of rendering. There is competition in this world. If I pay you two dollars today for your dead pig, and send you home with sweets, you will bring me more business later on, am I right?"

"I s'pose."

"So, by paying you, I keep you coming to me. And I get more skins and fat and bones to sell to places that make soap and dog-food and other things. I would be lying if I didn't tell you that I make more money off your pig than you do. But it is a service, little bird."

"I see," Thalia nodded, finishing off the last of the bacon. "It seems like a terrible thing to do."

"Thay, now, apologize for that," Lucius reached over and pinched her shoulder.

She shrugged him off.

The Rendering Man said, "It is most terrible. But it is part of how we all must live life. Someone must do the rendering. If not, everything would go to waste and we would have dead pigs rotting with flies on the side of the road, and the smell."

"But you're like a buzzard or something."

The man held his index finger up and shook it librates at teacher about to give a lesson. "If I saw myself as a buzzard or jackal I could not look in the mirror. But others have said this to my face, little bird, and it

never hurts to hear it. I see myself as a man who takes the weak and weary and useless, empty shells of our animal brethren and breathes new life into them, makes them go on in some other fashion. I see it as a noble profession. It is only a pity that we do not render ourselves, for what a tragedy it is to be buried and left for useless, for worm fodder, when we could be brushing a beautiful woman's hair, or adorning her purse, or even, perhaps, providing shade from the glare of a lamp so that she might read her book and not harm her eyes. It is a way to soften the blow of death, you see, for it brings forth new life. And one other thing, sweet," he brought his face closer to hers until she could smell his breath of sausage and ham, "we each have a purpose in life, and our destiny is to seek it out, whatever the cost, and make ourselves one with it. It is like brown eyes or blond hair or short and tall, it is there in us, and will come out no matter how much we try to hide it. I did not choose this life; it chose me. I think you understand, little bird, yes. You and I know."

Thalia thought about what he'd said all the way home. She tried not to imagine the old sow being tossed in a vat and stirred up in the boiling water until it started to separate into its different parts. Lucius scolded her for trying to take the Rendering Man to task, but she ignored him. She felt like a whole new world had been opened to her, a way of seeing things that she had not thought of before, and when she stepped out of the truck, at her home, she heard the crunch of the grass beneath her feet differently, the chirping of crickets, too, a lovely song, and a flock of starlings shot from the side of the barn just as she tramped across the muddy expanse that led to the chicken coops-the starlings were her sign from the world that there was no end to life, for they flew in a pattern, which seemed to her to approximate the scar on the left hand side of the Rendering Man's face.

It was like destiny.

She climbed up on the fence-post and looked down the road. A dust-wind was blowing across to the Grass Widow's house, and she heard the cats, all of them, yowling as if in heat, and she wondered if that old witch had really poisoned the pig.

2

Thalia was almost twenty-nine, and on a train in Europe, when she thought she recognized the man sitting across from her. She was now calling herself just Lia, and had not lived in Oklahoma since she left for New York in 1939 to work as a secretary-she'd taught herself short-hand and typing at the motel where her mother had worked. Then, during the war, Lucius died fighting in France, and her mother and father, whom she'd never developed much of a relationship with, called her back to the old farm. Instead, she took up with a rich and spoiled playboy who had managed to get out of serving in the military because of flat-feet, and went to live with him at his house overlooking the Hudson River. She went through a period of grief for the loss of her brother; after which, she married the playboy in question. Then, whether out of guilt or general self-destruction, her husband managed to get involved in the war, ended up in a labor camp, and had died there not two weeks before liberation. She had inherited quite a bit of money after an initial fight with one of her husband's illegitimate children. It was 1952, and she wanted to see Germany now, to see what had happened, and where her husband of just a few months had died; she had been to Paris already to see the Hotel where her brother supposedly breathed his last, suffering at the hands of the Nazis but dying a patriot, unwilling to divulge secret information. She was fascinated by the whole thing: the war, Paris, labor camps, and Nazis.

She had grown lovely over the years; she was tall like her father and brother had been, but had her mother's eyes, and had learned, somewhere between Oklahoma and New York, to project great beauty without having inherited much.

The man across from her, on the train, had a scar

on the left-hand side of his face.

It sparked a series of memories for her, like lightning flashing behind her eyes. The stone house on the Post Road, the smokestacks, the mule in the front yard, an enormous breakfast which still made her

feel fat and well-fed whenever she thought of it. It was the Rendering Man from home.

On this train. Traveling through Germany from France. Now, what are the chances, she wondered, of that happening? Particularly, after what happened when she was eleven.

Not possible, she thought.

He's a phantom. I'm hallucinating. Granny hallucinated that she saw her son Toby back from the First World War walking towards her even without his legs.

She closed her eyes; opened them. He was still there. Something so ordinary about him that she knew he was actually sitting there and not just an image conjured from her inner psyche.

He spoke first, "I know you, don't I?"

She pretended, out of politeness, that he must not be talking to her. There was a large German woman sitting beside her, with a little boy on the other side. The German woman nodded politely to her, but didn't acknowledge the man across from them. Her little boy had a card trick that he was trying to show his mother, but she paid no attention.

"Miss? Excuse me?" he said.

Then, it struck her: he spoke English perfectly,

and yet he looked very German.

He grinned when she glanced back at him. "See? I knew I knew you, when I saw you in the station. I said to myself, you have met that girl somewhere before. Where are you from, if I may ask?"

"New York," she lied, curious as to whether this really could possibly be the Rendering Man. How could it? He would have to be, what? Sixty? This man didn't seem that old, although he was not young by any stretch. "I'm a reporter."

He wagged his finger at her, like a father scolding his child. "You are not a reporter, miss, I think. I am not saying you are a liar, I am only saying that that is not true. Where is your notebook? Even a pencil? You are American, and your accent is New York, but I detect a southern influence. Yes, I think so. I hope you don't mind my little game. I enjoy guessing about people and their origins."

She felt uncomfortable, but nodded, "I enjoy games, too, to pass the time."

She glanced at the German woman who was bringing out a picnic for her son. Bread and soup, but no meat. There was not a lot of meat to go around even six years after the war.

The man said, "You are a woman of fortune, I think. Lovely jewelry, and your dress is quite expensive, at least here in Europe. And I heard you talking with the conductor—your French is not so good, I think, and your German is worse. You drew out a brand of cigarettes from a gold case, both very expensive. So, you are on the Grand Tour of Europe, and like all Americans with time on their hands, you want to see the Monster Germany, the Fallen."

"Very perceptive," she said. She brought her cigarette case out and offered him one of its contents.

He shook his head. "I think these are bad for the skin and the breathing, don't you?"

She shrugged. "It all goes someday."

He grinned. "Yes, it does. The sooner we accept that, the better for the world. And I know your name now, my dear, my little bird, you are the little Thalia Canty from Moncure County Oklahoma."

She shivered, took a smoke, coughed, stubbed the cigarette out. She had white gloves on her hands she looked at them. She remembered the German wife's apron, smeared with dark brown stains. She didn't look up for a few minutes.

"I would say this is some coincidence, little bird," the Rendering Man said, "but it is not, not really. The real coincidence happened in the Alsace, when you got off the train for lunch. I was speaking with a butcher who is a friend of mine, and I saw you go into the cafe. I wouldn't have recognized you at all, for I have not seen you since you were a child, but you made a lasting impression on me that morning we had breakfast together. I saw it in you, growing, Just as it had grown

in me. Once that happens, it is like a halo around you. It's still there; perhaps someone might say it is a play of light, the aurora borealis of the flesh, but I can recognize it. I followed you back to the train, got my ticket, and found where you were seated. But still I wasn't positive it was you, until just a moment ago. It was the way you looked at my face. The scar. It was a souvenir from a large cat which gouged me quite deeply. No ordinary cat, of course, but a tiger, sick, from the circus. The tiger haunts me to this day, by way of the scar. Do you believe in haunting? Ah, I think not, you are no doubt a good Disciple of Christ and do not believe that a circus cat could haunt a man. Yet, I see it sometimes in my dreams, its eyes, and teeth, and the paw reaching up to drag at my flesh. I wake my wife up, at night, just so she will stay up with me and make sure there is no tiger there. I know it is dead, but I have learned in life that sometimes these angels, as I call them (yes, dear, even the tiger is an angel for it had some message for me), do not stay dead too long. Perhaps I am your angel, little bird; you must admit it is strange to meet someone from just around the bend on the other side of the world."

She looked at him again, but tried not to see him in focus because she felt the pressing need to avoid this man at all costs. "I'm sorry, sir. You do have me pegged, but I can't for the life of me place you."

He smiled, his cheeks red. He wore a dark navy coat, and beneath it, a gray shirt. When he spoke again, it was as if he had paid no attention to her denial. "My wife, Eva, she is in Cologne, where we live, and where I should be going now. We came to Germany in 1935, because Eva's parents were ill and because, well, you must remember the unfortunate circumstance. I was only too glad to leave Oklahoma, since I didn't seem to get along with too many people there, and Germany seemed to be a place I could settle into. I found odd-jobs, as well as established a successful rendering business again. And then, well," he spread his hands out as if it were enough to excuse what happened to Germany. "But I knew you and I would meet again, little bird, it was there on your face. Your fascination and repulsion-is that not what magnets do to each other, pull and push? Yet, they are meant to be together. Destiny. You see, I saw your brother before he died, and I told him what was to come."

She dropped all pretense now. "What kind of game are you playing?"

"No game, Thalia Canty."

"Lia Fallon. Thalia Canty died in Oklahoma in the '30s."

"Names change through the years, even faces, but you are the little bird."

"And you are the Rendering Man."

He gasped with pleasure. "Yes, that would be how you know me. Tell me, did you run because of what you did?"

She didn't answer. "What about Lucius?"

The Rendering Man looked out the dark window as a town flew by. Rain sprinkled across the glass. "First, you must tell me."

"All right. I forgave myself for that a long time ago. I was only eleven, and you were partly responsible."

"Did I use the knife?"

She squinted her eyes. Wished she was not sitting there. "I didn't know what I was doing, not really."

"Seventeen cats must've put up quite a howl."
"I told you. I didn't know what I was really

doing."

"Yes you did. How long after before you ran?"

"I ran away four times before I turned seventeen.

Only made it as far as St. Louis most of the time."

"That's a long way from home for a little girl."

"I had an aunt there. She let me stay a month at a time. She understood."

"But not your mama and daddy," he said with some contempt in his voice. "A woman's murdered, we all called her the Grass Widow. Remember? Those Okies all thought she was a witch. All she was was sad and lonely. Then, all she was was dead. She and her cats, chopped up and boiled."

"Rendered," she said.

"Rendered. So they come for me, and thank god I was able to get my wife out of the house safely before the whole town burned it down."

"How was I to know they'd come after you?"

He was silent, but glaring.

"I didn't mean for you to get in trouble."

"Do you know what they did to me?" he asked. She nodded.

He continued, "I still have a limp. That's my way of joking; they broke no bones. Bruises and cuts, my hearing was not good until 1937, and I lost the good vision in my right eye-it's just shadows and light on that side. Pain in memory brings few spasms to the flesh. It is the past. Little bird, but you think I am only angry at you. All those years, you are terrified you will run into me, so when you can, you get out for good. I was sure that little town was going to make another Bruno Hauptmann out of me. Killing a sad widow and her pets and boiling them for bones and fat. But even so, I was not upset with you, not too much. Not really. Because I knew you had it in you, I saw it that day, that we were cut from the same cloth, only you had not had the angel cross your path and tell you of your calling. It is not evil or dark, my sweet, it is the one calling that gives meaning to our short, idiotic lives; we are the gardeners of the infinite, you and I."

"Tell me about my brother," she pleaded softly. The German woman next to her seemed to sense the strangeness of the conversation, and took her son by



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HARLAN

the hand and led him out of the cabin.

"He did not die bravely," the Rendering Man said,
"if that's what you're after. He was hit in the leg, and
when I found him, he had been in a hotel with some
French girl, and was a scandal for bleeding on the
sheets. I was called in by my commander, and went
about my business."

"You worked with the French?"

He shook his head. "I told you, I continued my successful rendering business in Germany, and expanded to a factory outside of Paris in '48. Usually the men were dead, but sometimes, as was the case with your brother, little bird, I had to stop their hearts. Your brother did not recognize me, and I only recognized him when I saw his identification. As he died, do you know what he told me? He told me that he was paying for the sins that his sister had committed in her lifetime. He cried like a little baby. It was most embarrassing. To think, I once paid him two dollars and a good sausage for a dead pig."

Lia stood up. "You are dreadful," she said. "You are the most dreadful human being who has ever

existed upon the face of the earth."

"I am, if you insist. But I am your tiger; your angel," the Rendering Man said. He reached deep into the pocket of his coat and withdrew something small. He handed it to her.

She didn't want to take it, but grabbed it anyway.

"It is his. He would've wanted you to have it."

She thought, at first, it was a joke, because the small leather coin purse didn't seem to be the kind of thing Lucius would have.

When she realized what it was, she left the cabin and walked down the slender hall, all the way to the end of the train. She wanted to throw herself off, but, instead, stood and shivered in the cold wet rain of Germany, and did not return to the cabin again.

She could not get over the feeling that the part of the coin purse that drew shut resembled wrinkled human lips.

3

"He's here," the old woman said.

She heard the squeaking wheels of the orderly's cart down the corridor.

"He's here. I know he's here. Oh, dear God, he's here."
"Will you shut up, lady?" the old man in the

wheelchair said.

An orderly came by and moved the man's chair

An orderly came by and moved the man's chair on down the hall.

The old woman could not sit up well in bed. She looked at the green ceiling. The window was open. She felt a breeze. It was spring. It always seemed to be spring. A newspaper lay across her stomach. She lifted it up. Had she just been reading it? Where were her glasses?

Oh, there. She put them on. Looked at the newspaper. It was The New York Times,

March 23, 1994.

She called out for help, and soon an orderly (the handsome one with the bright smile) was there, like a genie summoned from a lamp. "I thought I saw a man in this room," she said.

"Mrs. Ehrlich, nobody's in here."

"I want you to check that closet. I think he's here."

The orderly went good-naturedly to the closet. He opened the door, and moved some of the clothes around. He turned to smile at her.

"I'm sure I saw him there . . . Waiting. Crouching," she said. "But he may have slipped beneath the bed."

Again, a check beneath the bed. The orderly sat down in the chair beside the bed. "He's not here."

"How old am I? I'm not very old, really, I'm not losing my wits yet, am I? Dear God in heaven, am I?"

"No, Mrs. Ehrlich. You're seventy-one going on eleven."

"Why'd you say that?"

What?"

"Going on eleven. Why eleven? Is there a conspiracy here?"

"No, ma'am."

"You know him don't you? You know him and you're just not saying."

"Are you missing Mr. Ehrlich again?"

"Mr. Ehrlich, Mr. Vane, Mr. Fallon, one husband after another, young man, nobody can miss them because nobody can remember them. Are you sure I haven't had an unannounced visitor?"

The orderly shook his head.

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, the orderly was gone. It had grown dark. Where is my mind? she thought. Where has it gone? Why am I here at seventy-one when all my friends are still out in the world living, why, my granny was eighty-eight before senility befell her, how dare life play with me so unfairly.

She reached for her glass of water, and took a sip. Still, she thought she sensed his presence in the room with her, and could not sleep the rest of the night. Before dawn, she became convinced that the Rendering Man was somewhere nearby lurking; she tried to dress, but the illness had taken over her arms to such a great extent that she could not even get her bra on.

She sat up, half-naked, on her bed, the light from the hallway like a spotlight for the throbbing in her skull.

"I have led a wicked life," Thalia whispered to the



morning. She found the strength at five-thirty to get her dressing gown around her shoulders, and to walk down the hall, sure that she would see him at every

The door to Minnie Cheever's door was open. which was odd, and she stepped into it. "Minnie?" Her friend was nearly ninety-three, and was not in bed. Thalia looked around, and finally found Minnie lying on the floor, on her way to the bathroom. Thalia checked her pulse; she was alive, but barely. Thalia's limbs hurt, but she used Minnie's wheelchair to get Minnie down the hallway, onto the elevator, and down to the basement, where the endless kitchen began,

They found her there, two cooks and one orderly, like that, caught at last, Thalia Canty, all of seventy-one and going on eleven, chopping Minnie Cheever up into small pieces, and dropping each piece into one of several large pots, boiling with water, on the stove,

She turned, when she heard their footsteps, and smiled, "I knew you were here, we're like destiny, you and me. Mister Rendering Man, but you'll never have me, will you?" She held her arms out for them to see, "I scraped off all the fat and skin I could, Mister Rendering Man, you can have all these others, but you ain't never gonna get my hide and fat and bones to keep useful in this damned world. You hear me? You ain't never gonna render Thalia, and this I swear!" She tried to laugh, but it sounded like a saw scraping metal. The joke was on the Rendering Man, after all, for she would never, ever, render herself up to him.

It took two men to hold her down, and in a short time, her heart gave out. She was dead; when her body was taken to the morgue, it was discovered that she'd been scraping berself raw, almost to within an eighth of an inch of her internal organs.

It was a young girl, a candy-striper named Nancy, going through Thalia's closet to help clean it out, who found the dried skins beneath a pile of filthy clothing. The skins were presumably from Thalia's own body. sewn together, crudely representing a man. Thalia had drawn magic-marker eyes and lips and a nose on the face; and a scar.

Those who found Thalia Canty, as well as the candy-striper who fainted at the sight of the skin, later thought they saw her sometimes, in their bedrooms, or in traffic, or just over their shoulders, clutching a knife.

She would live in their hearts forever. An angel.

A tiger.

- CD

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MATTHEW J. COSTELLO

NIGHTMARE ALLEY

I was talking to another horror writer, er, dark fantasist, er, mainstream writer who enjoys the outre—and he mentioned that while logging his miles on his treadmill this evening, he was going to watch—for the first time—Mr. Sardonicus.

I said: "You've never seen Mr. Sardonicus?" It is, of course, part of the oeuvre, the string of cheesy horror exploitation vehicles created by William Castle.

William Castle's career stretched from mainstream films in the 40s, to his fine producer's chores on a genuine A-film, Rosemary's Baby.

But for a lot of us, Castle's reputation rests with the core bod of work, the string of matinee-filling features he made in luxurious black and white back when movies cost fifty cents and you actually got butter on your popcorn.

(And lest some of you think that I'm just lost in a nostalgic meandering through the days of yore ... well, you're right. But hang in there—you might learn something.)

The first Castle film I saw was a weird number called *Macabre* (1958) which introduced me, at a tender young age, to a transvestite killer. Without re-viewing the film, I recall that the killer, in the end, is revealed to be a woman who's a

man. How prescient? How anticipatory of the androgynous times we now live in, n'est pas?

The Castle film that most of Haunted Hill (1959 and available on a neat laser disc paired with Attack of the 50 Foot Woman). House on Haunted Hill featured one of Castle's most famous gimmicks . . . dubbed "Emergol—More startling than 3-Di"

At the moment when Vincent Price (peace, old spookeyman, wherever you are) reels a skeleton out of a vat of acid to frighten his wife, a skeleton started wheeling its way over the heads of the screaming kids in the audience.

Of course it wasn't scary.

In fact, lots of kids threw empty popcorn boxes and meteoroid-shaped bombons (tiny gobs of vanilla ice cream covered with chocolate crust—highly recommended) at the cardboard skeleton.

Still, we appreciated the effort. Here was a guy making movies who shared our sensibilities—or lack of same. He gave us a real skeleton! Who cares if it was cheesy, creaky and noisy. At least he was trying to do something.

Then there was Thirteen Ghosts (also 1959), a film I haven't seen since it opened. Here, abetted by the spooky demeanor of Elisha Cook Jr., you were given a special ghost viewer. Basically, the red-tinted ghost viewer filtered out the ghosts of which there were thirteen of them. If they were too scary, you could make them go away.

As if . . .

The Tingler featured the "process" Percepto that had certain seats wired so when the creature made its appearance "in the theater," some lucky patrons would feel the tingle.

The thesis in the film, by the way, was that fear causes a creature like a giant sow bug to grow in one's spine. The only thing that keeps this "Tingler" down on the farm was a scream. So if you were mute—and got scared—well the tingler would grow and grow.

The neat point in the film was when the tingler is loose in the movie house in the movie . . . and the screen goes dark and Vincent (Sayonara, scary dude) yells, "The tingler is loose in this theater. Scream, scream for your life!"

Which we, good little Horror Youth, did.

I've met people who swear that some seats were wired with a "buzzer" of some kind. But I think the process was a real scam. Unlike the skeleton and the ghost viewer, I don't think that the tingle process ever existed. Please write with corrections

So now to Mr. Sardonicus (1961), another film I have not seen since I was a kid, which I'm sure could in no way live up to my memories.

The film starred Guy Rolfe who—if memory serves—misplaces a Lotto ticket (okay, it wasn't Lotto ... but it was a big Transylvanian lottery of some kind). And the place he misplaces said ticket is in the pocket of the jacket now worth by his recently buried father.

So, he has no choice but to exhume his dead father's body to get the ticket. Time and decay have worked their wonders, and dear old Dad doesn't took so good. There's a quick shot of the corpse, the weird death grimace, the flesh rotted away from the jaw, and something happens to Mr. Sardonicus.

What happens is that his face takes on the caste of the dead man, adopting a weird, sardonic grin. I seem to remember that you had to wait a long time before you got to see that weird face—and in the meantime Mr. S. has cashed in his ticket and adopted a life of debauchery, all the time keeping his face hidden.

(The facts of the film are, of course, sketchy. This is the memory of nearly thirty-five years ago. For a more precise analysis, please contact my aforementioned friend. Send me five dollars in an envelope and I will speed that person's name to you.)

Castle's gimmick at the end was a "punishment poll." The audience got to vote on Sardonicus's fate after he did something unusually horrible, horrible even for such a currently debauched person. You could hold the card one way, vote thumbs up, and he'd live. Or you could hold the card the other way, thumbs down, and Sardonicus would die. Castle himself appeared on the screen and seemed to pretend to count votes in the audience, before letting the drama play on.

I've been told that there was only one ending.

Guess which one.

But this attempt . . . this illusion of interactivity was certainly decades ahead of its time. It also had the nice flavor of the Roman arena over it.

Sure, that film and the others and their gimmicks were cheesy and exploitative . . . though *The Tingler* remains remarkably effective. But God, boys and girls, don't they sound like fun?



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EDWARD BRYANT

BOOK REVIEWS

Harlan Ellison's Mefisto in Onyx (Mark V. Ziesing Books, \$16.95, 92p) is a physically small but expertly faceted gem of a novella. Designed and bound exquisitely in a nonstandard proportioned hardback format by one of the more ambitious specialty press moguls, it's destined to generate a fair amount of debate for Ellison readers and critics alike. Harlan does tend to stir controversy.

The first thing to strike the eye is the stark black and white jacket design by famed comics artist Frank Miller. It ably captures the essence of the story lying beneath the deceptively flip narrative voice. The patented Ellison narrative tone grabs the readers by the lapels in just a few pages—in the acknowledgments, as a matter of fact. There are two pages of auctorial nods, culminating in a pointed spear-thrust at some of the crew at Tor Books.

Then follows quite a welcome surprise. People who are not Harlan Ellison but find themselves introducing Ellison works usually find themselves in an odd sort of competitive situation. Many of us, I think, read Ellison's ephemeral matter with an interest nearly as keen as our expectations of the primary fiction. So it's quite tough job for an outsider. Artist

Miller acquits himself beautifully as an introducer. Not only can he draw, he's one hell of a raconteur. His account of a one-shot stint as guest cartoonist at a Delaware prison is a spellbinder.

Finally comes the story itself.

Finally comes the story itself is a vastly different voice than, say, "The Man Who Rowed Christopher Columbus Ashore" in the most recent Best American Short Stories. This new novella is Ellison the writer of verisimilitude rather than Ellison the writer of artifact. Mefisto in Onyx is solid, engaging melodrama with an effective, fairly unobtrusive undercoating of commentary.

The plot gives us Rudy Pairis. brilliant and troubled telepath. Rudy's never really been able to get his life in gear. It would seem he's never gotten a solid grip on his mental gift. Rudy's also a black man struggling to stay afloat in a predominantly white society. At Mefisto's beginning, Rudy's asked to perform a favor by his old friend Allison Roche. We're told right from the git-go that the pair had a sexual liaison exactly once, years before, and they're still edgy about it. Ally's a white Chief Assistant D.A. in Alabama. She's got a problem she feels only Rudy can help

with. Ally's the prosecutor respon-

sible for convicting one Henry

Lake Spanning, a guy responsible

for the serial murders of fifty-six persons, a monster in human form if ever there was one. Problem is, Ally's fallen in love with Spanningshe's taken to calling him Spanky—and wants Rudy to go into the guy's head and confirm his innocence. The execution date's only a few days off.

Loathe to fulfill his friend's request, Rudy hems and haws for half the story, but finally says yes. What happens then, of course, utimately requires the man to face up to who and what he is at his core. But in the process of making that odyssey, the damnedest things happen. I think the plot serviceably works, though the structure is frequently of gossamer thinness. But then silk strands can be pretty tough, can't they? Here, as load-bearers, they certainly are.

This definitely being the '90's with PC in full cry, some readers are going to argue over how Ellison portrays his narrator, and what he ultimately leads Rudy Paris toward. Some will note that Rudy's voice is a lot more like Harlan's own than, say Mike Tyson. But so? I think the author's quite aware of the pitfalls of stereotyping, and the rewards of avoiding same. Rudy's final epiphany is an arguable manifestation of realpolitik rather than a kneejerk dip into idealism. And that, these days, requires major

courage on the writer's part.

The publisher's press materials suggest that Mefisio in Onya may sweep the awards in two or three different fields. Your guess is as good as mine in terms of what the voters think. But whatever happens, this book is both required reading and unignorable.

Mr. Murder (Putnam. \$24. 415pp) is virtually a textbook example of the things best-seller novelist Dean Koontz does right when he's hitting on all cylinders. This is a flat-out entertainment paced at breakneck speed. As with most of Koontz's recent novels, the book blithely steps back and forth across arbitrary genre boundaries. That (from a writer's point of view) is one of the real perks of having heavy sales clout. Mr. Murder starts with a sort of dark fantasy tone, very paranoid and sinister; incorporates a solid psycho-killer plot: invokes salient elements of major political conspiracy; puts a sympathetic nuclear American family in hideous jeopardy; throws in a breathless cross-country chase; and then rationalizes the whole thing in an orthodox science fiction manner. Nice work if you can get it.

All the goodies can help you overlook the little annoyances: sulfur powder and sulfa powder are equally medicinal in one character's view, other characters get away with mounting snow chains on their tires many, many miles before there's a flake of snow; and perhaps most inexplicably of all, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, doesn't get its first snow until well into December. And so on. Carping detail? Well, sure, but one hopes for no irrelevant distractions in this kind of classeat melorama.

Mr. Murder—and the title's one People Magazine concocts when they run an article on the novel's lead good guy—is Koontz's take on the doppelganger device, thus making it particularly interesting to contrast and compare with

Stephen King's The Dark Half and Richard Christian Matheson's Crade By. Each novel holds a fascinating level of metafiction in terms of bringing a writer protagonist into confrontation with his shadow side.

The story's protagonist. Marty Stillwater, is a prosperous California writer of suspense novels. He's got a smart attractive wife, and a pair of smart, attractive young daughters. He's also, right from the start, got a scary antagonist. Someone-or somethingcalled Alfie, a chilly assassin of unknown origin and uncertain control-is being inexorably drawn across the continent to southern California. Alfie's learned virtually everything he knows from the movies-literally-and he's feeling an ever more driving desire to take up his deserved role as head of the Stillwater family, Marty, Alfie feels, is an imposter. A little bloody violence will fix everything. And it goes on from there as the

characters all converge on an inevitable collision point. Not just a situation where the reader waits for an accident—this is more the nitro truck from Wages of Fear heading right for a bus full of nuns and orphans.

There are other onion layers unpecling in proper order. Pursuing Alfie are a couple of shadowy agents. Both are wonderful supporting characters, particularly the surprising Trekker whose nose is apparently always buried in the latest Var Trek paperback.

Not only is there something here for all the folks out in mass market heaven, there's another layer for those in the crowd interested in writing and the creative process. At one dire point, Marty and his wife cogently discuss fiction as a form of medicine for chaos-impaired humanity. Earlier, there's a priceless scene wherein the killer Alfie discovers that writing a novel isn't as easy as it had looked in the abstract. Then there's the stone-cold villain who doesn't think a whole lot of books, but considers Lethal Weaton III to be the best movie of all time: " . . . it had no story line that made enough sense to bother following. did not expect the viewer to watch the characters change and grow, was composed entirely of a series of violent action sequences, and was louder than a stockear race and a Megadeth concert combined."

Though Koontz's characters sometimes stop the action to explain what a fugue state is or fulminate on the deplorable behavior of the American judiciary, his pro-lit-

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eracy comments are welcome in the current climate. And they don't get in the way of the novel's forward motion. That powerful storytelling momentum counts for a lot, particularly when the author tries to wrap up an enormous amount of plot culmination in the final chapter or so. Dean Koontz continues to perfect his present recipe for entertainment and commentary. Oh, there's also a cool section in which critics come in for a gentle drubbing—but I won't say anything. Koontz is right.

So, do you remember Fawcett Gold Medal books? In the '50s and '60s they were a dependable source of concise, 60,000-word, punchy, frequently noir, paperback original novels. As Fawcett was swallowed up by other publishers, and then gobbled again and again, the Gold Medal imprint sort of got lost in the shifting marketing strategies and power struggles there in Gomorrah-on-the-Hudson. Recently an Ed Gorman western was published as a Gold Medal original, but that looks to be something of a sentimental coda to a proud tradition, a last anomalous gasp of something severely adventurous. If the line is finally expiring, then it leaves some magnificent memories. Richard Matheson was published there; so was Jim Thompson; Charles Beaumont wrote for them pseudonymously. And so on. Many, many good writers, and some great ones as well.

They should still be around, the Gold Medal folks, publishing nitro-laced, in-your-face fiction for the '90s. They should, in fact, be printing Norman Partridge's novelistic debut, Slippin' Into Darkness (CD Publications, \$35, 285pp). But since they're not, we've got the good fortune of seeing the novel appear in a cool CD Publications hardback edition with great artwork by Alan Clark.

Now you do remember Norm Partridge, don't you? One of the few hot new guy writers who's proving he can arm-wrestle competitively with all those tough new female writers? The guy whose short stories are appearing in most of the new theme anthologies, and whose first collection, Roadkill's Mr. Fox & Other Fenal Tales copped the Bram Stoker last year?

Well, that Norman Partridge has presented us with a killer novel that proves out the promise displayed by stories like "The Cut-Man" and the novella, "Guignoir." One thing he's accomplished is a weird generational thing. The world is full of '60s and '80s and '90s writers. No one pays much attention to the '70s. It was a pretty dismal decade, after all. And that's the point here. Norm Partridge has taken the geekoids, loonies, and disco dregs of the lost Carter/Ford generation and checked up on them eighteen years later. Slippin' Into Darkness is something of a progress report on a bunch of malign, damaged, or ineffectual bozos for whom 1976 was about the most important year of their lives. Now it's 1994 in California's blue-collar Vallejo, and everyone (with one significant exceptionshe's still around, but she's dead) is about to find out in one twentyfour-hour period just how haunting the past can be.

It doesn't sound appetizing? Style's the key, here. Partridge has created a labyrinthine plot and slyly grotesque atmosphere in the tradition of the most effective episodes of Twin Peaks. David Lynch would, in fact, feel right at home in Partridge's grimly wacko creation as each and every character sees events rapidly spin 'way out of his or her control. The tone's got the gut-deep chording and melancholy sax wail of a vintage Springsteen ballad. But in Slippin' Into Darkness, the darkness ain't just at the edge of town-it seeps right through to the center of the soul. The rhythms permeating every page are not the flashy glitz, but

rather the tragically stirring and exalting riffs of R'n'R Good Stuff.

Let's start with this: every single character in this story is screwed up. The question is, what are they going to do about it? What can they do? For example, there's a guy who's an induced psychotic, hovering ever on the edge of being a murderer, who's both self-destructive and a necrophile. He's the good guy. The story opens with Steve Austin, the troubled namesake of the "Six Million Dollar Man." Traumatized nearly two decades before, he-literally-cannot sleep. And he does not dream. Presently on the knife-edge of sanity as a cop, he's ready to accept delusion as readily as the weather. Then there are four gone-to-seed high school jocks who did something very, very bad eighteen years before. They've arrogantly-and wrongly, it turns out-assumed their deed to be part of the dead past. There's Amy Peyton, the Good Girl who isn't, not really. And there's Shutterbug, the black alien in a white world, self-deluding pornographer and perhaps something far worse. Then there's a casual fat-boy killer, an unctuous mortuary administrator, an efficient FBI agent who grossly underestimates the deadly quagmire she's getting herself into. Catalyzing it all is April Louise Destino, Bad Girl, tragic victim, recent suicide. Her spirit haunts all the rest of the characters. Is she a literal ghost? Maybe, maybe not. It doesn't matter. Partridge ably straddles the line of magic realism here. Whether she's some form of ectoplasm or simply the last scream of conscience and dim moral awareness for the characters, April Destino exists.

Partridge ultimately pulls off a beautiful dramatic hat trick. He makes us care about severely screwed-up people who remind us of our own worst fears, moods, and impulses. Likable? Not an issue. Empathizable? Very. The novel climaxes in violence: concludes with an astonishing hard-ball emotional uppercut to the jaw and jab to the gut that'll leave the reader breathless, heart in throat,

So do you get the idea I loved this one? Bruce Springsteen I sometimes fear for, but Norman Partridge, I feel certain now, is the reason rock 'n' roll will never die.

Silver Salamander Press had a good start-up year with a novella by Michael Shea and a remarkable collection by Lucy Taylor. Now they've seen 1993 out with Lost in Booth Nine the debut collection from Adam-Troy Castro. Castro's been considered hotter than most other recent writers because of such high-energy stories as "Clearance to Land," the Pulphouse story about the skyjacking terrorists' raid on hell.

Lost in Booth Nine holds an affectionate introduction by Dean Wesley Smith and Kristine Kathryn Rusch, along with a pair of long novelettes, a novella, and a short story. None of the fiction's been published before, and is loosely linked through the conceit of a sexplex peepshow called Les Girls XXX. In a prologue, the author suggests the leitmotif of the peepshow being a monument to rape in all its manifest forms, "... conceived by lust and greed, and fed every single day by the hopeless fantasies of a thousand lonely men." The peepshow, says Castro, is also a spawning place for a horrific pantheon of gods; a place to breed, and a feeding ground.

Sound promising? For the most part, the book comes through in fine fashion. "Peepshow" is a not entirely predictable story of psychic vampirism centering around the women who perform in the peepshow itself. Two very different sorts of predators find themselves in a spiral dance with a bitter destination awaiting one or both.

"The Girl in Booth Nine" is

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the other side of the coin-or perhaps the edge, at least. It's the account of poor, fat, unloved Rory who finds what satisfactions in life he can at the peepshow. The only problem comes when he's picked out of the crowd by the deus ex machina, the gathered, tortured energy stored and made sentient by the peepshow. It isn't pretty.

Both the first two stories carry a real but modulated power. Author Castro then lets out all the stops with "Miracle Drug," truly the centerpiece of the book. In "Miracle Drug," two city cops answer a complaint from an elderly neighbor of an abandoned house now apparently occupied by " . . . evil fornicating devil-worshipping loud-music-playing dope addicts." As it turns out, the old lady across the street doesn't suspect the half of it. Investigating officers Rossi and Posselvitch get 'way more than they bargain for when they start to explore the house and discover that highly weird plumbing is only the

first step on a shaky staircase to the unspeakable.

Tone and pace are everything in "Miracle Drug." I think this one qualifies as extreme fiction if only because the author tromps down on the fictive accelerator and never lets pedal leave the metal. If I wanted to compare referents, I'd say this one's something of an updating to the '90s of Harlan Ellison's "Shattered Like a Glass Goblin," but fused in an unholy way with the composite body of Chuck Jones cartoons. And for you newbies, this could be a midbudget movie helmed by the Sam Raimi of Evil Dead II. It goes and goes, and only stops grudgingly after a wonderfully apocalyptic scene.

The collection ends with something of a coda. "The Pussy Expert" is short and has nothing directly to do with the neighborhood of the previous three stories. It's a wonderfully wry character piece about a Chicago cabbie from hell. It also allows the book to bat 500 when it comes to happy endings, something unusual for this sort of supercharged dark fantasy fiction.

Castro's writing is a little uneven sometimes, but the energy
carries it through. All the stories
here are well-worth reading,
though "Miracle Drug" does take
the perverse prize for manic enthusiasm. What Castro can do at full
novel length is anybody's guess,
but Lost in Booth Nine bodes well.
And if the author decides to stick
with short fiction, then fine too.
Such a professional decision would
be no weirder than what apparently happens to his characters
every time out.

P.S. Publishing deadlines being the peculiar beasts they are, I never got to recommend three of my favorite story collections from 1993 in these pages. So I want to do that briefly now, just to go on record in Cemetery Dance. These three books are necessary-no, essential reading if you want to know who's who and what's what in contemporary dark fantasy and horror. Also if you'd like to see the overlaps as brave writers who don't care to be wrapped in genre restrictions break free. First there's Nightmares & Dreamscapes (Viking, \$27.50, 816pp) by Stephen King. King's the establishment, of course, but he's the vital, still-creative wing of what sometimes seems to be a creaky old mansion of I've Got Mine So Why Should I Try Anymore? writers. The new collection, his first in seven years, is an enormous compilation of stories, along with a teleplay, a poem, and an absolutely sensational article about Little League Baseball, I measure the latter's success by the fact that I, a person profoundly uninterested in the National Pastime, still was enthralled. Reading Nightmares & Dreamscapes is something like spending a month as a houseguest. The host is friendly and anecdotal, and tells bang-up bedtime stories. The house is quite comfortable, but there are those peculiar noises from the basement and attic The secand notable collection is I medeath (Warner, \$20, 310pp) by Dan Simmons. Here are five novellas arranged as something of a literary symphony, the movements ranged around the twining themes of Eros and Thanatos, love and death. Two of the stories were published previously: "Entropy's Bed at Midnight" as an expensive chapbook from Lord John Press; "Dying in Bangkok" in Playboy. The first is a haunting and affecting mainstream story about chance tragedy and parental love; the second is a creepy sexual vampire tale that may affect Thai tourism. The brand-new stories range from a retelling and synthesis of Lakota myth, to a science fiction piece about our addiction to memory that's so dark it's ultraviolet, to a masterful novella called "The Great Lover," an eerie visit to the War to End All Wars. Lovedeath is

one of those books in which the author submits he can do just about anything exceedingly welland then does exactly that. It's a virtuoso effort. The third recommended collection is Lucy Taylor's Close to the Bone (Silver Salamander Press, \$10, 200pp). In terms of public visibility right now, Taylor's where Poppy Z. Brite, Kathe Koja, and Melanie Tem were a couple of years ago. Believe me when I say that her work will be earning the same attention and audiences very soon. At the moment, she just happens to be the best-kept secret in horror. With a variety of magazine and anthology appearances, a pair of chapbooks, and this collection behind her, and two more collections coming up in the near future. Taylor's now on the literary fasttrack. With a little bit of Southern gothic sensibility and a lot of supercharged erotic content, Taylor's stories, like all the best fiction of any variety, spins off of character, relationships, love and pain. Close to the Bone contains ten stories, most of them originals. There's dark fantasy, SF, and mainstream here, but it's all horror, all extreme fiction. The SF piece doesn't quite succeed, but the others all do; and one, "The Family Underwater," is brilliant.

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A NOVEL EXCERPT BY JOSEPH A. CITRO

Excerpt from The Reality Conspiracy: An Anecdotal Reconstruction of the Events at Hobston, Vermont

On Saturday, June 25, Jerry Finny was ten minutes late for Bible School.

He had dallied and dreamed and dragged his feet all the way from home. His only stop had been at Gorman's Drugstore where he'd unloaded part of this week's five-dollar allowance. Gorman's was the only place in town that still carried packs of Marvel Universe Cards. They also had a super selection of comic books.

As he walked, Jerry hugged his purchases to his chest. Jeez, he thought, this business of going to Bible School on Saturday is for the birds. It's ruining the whole morning!

He glanced at his watch. Almost ten. Gotta

hurryl

Next year he wouldn't have to rush. Next year, when he'd be twelve years old, his parents wouldn't make his allowance dependent on Bible School attendance. At least that's what his dad said, and Dad didn't lie. Usually.

Jerry took a minute to hide the cards and his Punisher comic amid the pages of Bible Stories and Christian Tales; they'd give him something to think about during class.

Pausing in front of the old brick Baptist church, Jerry looked up at the steeple and watched puffy white clouds drift across the blue morning sky. In Jerry's mind that pointed spire was not a church steeple at all; it was a rocket ship almed at Europa, one of the moons of the planet Jupiter.

He checked his watch again. No sweat. So what if Captain Finny was a few minutes late for boarding. The passengers would already be in their seats. The mission could get under way the moment he took his place at the control panel. He hoped.

Jerry walked up the huge stone steps to the church doors, confident that he walked in silence. Slowly, carefully, he opened one side of the heavy double doors and looked inside. The scent of burning candles was the odor of rocket fuel, and the vacant interior of

the church told him his fellow travelers were already assembled in the seating rooms below.

If Miss Beth Damon, otherwise known as Deathdemon, wasn't teaching today, he might just get away with this late arrival. If the Deathdemon was aboard, he'd get away with nothing.

Deathdemon, that three-legged monster, had been around forever. Even when Jerry's mom and dad were kids in Baptist Bible School, Miss Damon had been there, waving her cane, insisting on punctuality. And she'd always said the same thing: "You young ones better learn to keep your appointments with the Lord. Learn it now, and you'll be better prepared for that one appointment hoolow misses."

The Lord, of course, had manufactured the Deathdemon way back in the days He was kicking Satan and the boys out of Heaven. That important bit of history meant two things: first, that she was about a million years old; and second, that the Lord could still control her behavior.

With that in mind, Captain Jerry Finny offered a little prayer to the Lord, asking for a safe delivery. Now, if he could make it to the captain's chair before the Deathdemon saw him, he could spend the next forty minutes touring the universe undisturbed. If she saw him, however, there'd be hell to pay.

Most of the crew and passengers had entered through the church's side door, which led downstairs to a lengthy corridor, lined on either side with class-rooms. Jerry had long ago discovered that if he went directly into the church, then downstairs through a narrow door near the altar, he would end up at the back of his classroom. Today, if he was in luck, he could dash to one of the desks in the back row while the Deathdemon was looking away, or sharpening her claws on the blackboard.

At the bottom of the narrow stairway, Jerry pecked into the classroom and his heart sank like a stone in a frog pond. There she was, her blue hair fluffed out like rancid cotton candy, her pasty, puffy face knotted in wrinkles like a piece of chewed gum, her skeleton hand clutching that ever-present walking

stick. She was using her stick to point out something on the blackboard.

To Jerry, the Deathdemon's voice always sounded like the last words of a strangled chicken. "Now, children," she squawked, "what we're really talking about is faith. Faith helps us to believe things, even if we can't prove them. No matter what scientists—or even your parents or your teachers—may say, there is no proof of the theory of evolution, not at all. There may be evidence, I don't say there is n't. But—and this is for certain, boys and girls—there is absolutely no proof, none whatsoever."

Smugly, the Deathdemon turned to the blackboard and underlined the word faith several times. The moment her eyes left the fifteen pupils, Jerry dashed to an end seat and slouched nonchalantly, as if he had been there long enough to get bored.

He watched her turn back toward the class, studying her eyes to see if she'd spotted him. Her expression revealed nothing.

"Now, boys and girls, faith is one of the most important of God's gifts to man. You don't have to study science to have faith. You don't have to be rich or famous to have faith. In fact, boys and girls"—here she contorted her face full of wrinkles into something resembling a smile—"if you have faith, real Christian faith, there is very little else you need."

Her gaze jumped from face to face as she clobbered everybody with her creepy false-toothed smile.



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Wow, thought Jerry, she's really wigging out today. He kept his Bible reader closed and his Marvel Universe Cards in his pocket. Right now the Deathdemon was far more entertaining than either.

She went on: "Now, I believe you children are living in one of the worst times of all, a time of tribulation. We are living in a 'scientific' age, an age where unholy science tries to replace God's truth with its own half-truths, and its guesses, and its 'scientific demonstrations'.

"Each year hundreds—no, thousands—of young people just like you drift away from God's love. They sin, they blaspheme, some even say there can't be a God, there can't be a Heaven. They say they can't believe in these sacred things because there is no prof!

"That's where faith comes in handy, boys and girls. These poor dear wanderers have lost their faith. But they miss it; we can tell because they try to replace it with science, or rock and roll music, or, worst of all, drugs.

"Children, science teaches you to look for proof, it teaches you to meed scientific truth, do you understand? Science teaches you that if something can't be proved, then it's not true. Now I'm not saying science is no good. Maybe it helps you keep your bodies healthy, perhaps learning about it even exercises your minds. But, children, science does nothing to strengthen the spirit. You may be healthy of mind and body, but if you're sick in spirit, Heaven will be lost to you."

Jerry scrunched down even farther in his seat as the Deathdemon's gaze darted from face to face, fast and random, like the metal bearing in a pinball machine. He kept his own eyes looking down, focused on his folded hands in his lap.

"Now, children," said the Deathdemon, gearing up again, "I want to talk to you about the value of prayer. I can promise you—without proof—that God understands perfectly well that Miss Beth Damon is a most loyal servant. He understands that my entire Christian life has been devoted to strengthening the spirits of His young people. I prayed, boys and girls, I prayed and I asked God, "What do I do, Lord? They're drifting away from me . . . all those lovely little lambs, Lord. I watch them drifting, more and more of them, year after year. They've learned to want proof, dear Lord, proof of the things they need faith to understand."

The Deathdemon took five short tottering steps

away from the blackboard. She moved around the teacher's desk and stood directly in front of Diane Bixby, who always sat, back straight, hands folded, right up in the front row.

Then the Deathdemon tucked her walking stick under her arm and stood unassisted. She picked up the Bible from Diane's desk, licked her fingers, and

began flipping pages.

She whispered now, apparently confident she had everyone's attention, "And God spoke to me in my heart, boys and girls. He said to me, 'Miss Damon, the lambs need a sign.'

"And, just like anytime when I need an answer, I riffled through the pages of my Holy Book, and when it felt just right, I dropped my index finger onto the page"—she acted this out as she spoke—"and do you know what that finger pointed to, boys and girls?"

No one answered.

"No? Well, I shouldn't wonder. Listen now; I'll read it to you."

She read:

"Then Moses answered, 'But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you." The Lord said to Moses, 'What is that in your hand?' Moses said, 'A rod.' And God said, 'Cast it on the ground.' So Moses cast it on the ground, and—"

In deep concentration she looked from face to face, and whispered hoarsely, "'Moses cast his rod onto the ground, and it became... a serpent!""

Jerry heard someone giggle as Miss Damon lifted her walking stick high above her head. The lights in the classroom seemed to dim, just a bit, hardly enough to notice, but Jerry was sure the room had suddenly become just a shade darker.

The Deathdemon held the walking stick above her head, one hand on each end. With her eyes squeezed shut, she began to speak faster than Jerry had ever heard before. "And I know you young people don't believe me so the Lord has said he'll give you a sign so you will believe what Miss Damon tells you and so you'll go home and tell your parents and you'll tell your teachers and you'll tell your friends and other little boys and girls who would stray away from the Holy Spirit of the Lord..."

Jerry gripped the edge of his desk with both hands until his knuckles whitened. He gritted his teeth and looked up, openmouthed, as Miss Damon continued.

"You'll tell them all that you have seen and all you have learned." She bowed her head, dropping her chin to her chest, and she said, "God told me, 'Miss Beth Damon, you cast your rod away," and with that she flung her walking stick, pushing it away from her

with both hands. It sailed over the heads of the motionless children.

Jerry heard his classmates gasp. He saw the stick stop in midair, directly over the head of Dickle Laymon and parallel with the floor. It hung there for a moment, suspended from nothing, until it began to rotate. Slowly at first, then the speed of rotation increased, gathering force, like the blade of a helicopter revving up.

Kids made noise. Frightened sounds. One of the girls, Linda Allen, began to cry. Miss Damon remained at the front of the room, eyes pinched shut, arms over her head, palms toward the class. "Quiet, children, quiet in the presence of the Lord."

Jerry couldn't pull his eyes from that magical stick; it righted itself now, turning like the wheel of fortune at the firemen's carnival.

The Deathdemon pointed. "Look, children! There is your proof! There is your proof of the Lord!"

Joey Arnold shricked and ran for the door. The stick sailed like a javelin leaving an athlete's hand. It connected with the back of Joey's head—Thwapl—knocking the boy against the wall beside the coat rack. Joey lay on the floor, scrunched into an S shape, hands and arms trying to protect his bloody head from further assault.

Now the stick righted itself and stood in front of the exit, weaving ever so slightly back and forth. No visible hand held it, but it stood there just the same.

"Lord knows your sins, boys and girls. You can't hide anything from the Lord!" Miss Damon was screeching now. Linda Allen and her friend Rose sat on the floor, hugging each other and wailing. Dickie Laymon hid under his desk. Johnny Coon, Coon the goon, had his arms folded on his desktop and his face buried in the folds.

Jerry watched the cane. Now it was jumping up and down. It looked like a pogo stick with an invisible rider as it bounced down the aisle. Occasionally it paused, snapping to the right or left to whack some kid in the head.

Most of the kids were crying. Some pressed their palms tightly against their eyes and shook their heads left and right. A girl, Debbie Swale, was chanting "Nonononon."

Jerry watched the stick make its way up the center aisle, tapping loudly on the floor tiles like Long John Silver's crutch. It stopped, still standing under its own mysterious power, right beside Diane Bixby, directly in front of Miss Damon.

Diane leaned to the left, trying to get as far away as possible, yet not daring to leave her seat.

Miss Damon's fingers were linked together, pressing tightly against her solar plexus. With eyes closed, her lips moved rapidly in silent prayer. The walking stick stopped swaying, snapped to rigid attention.

Jerry couldn't tear his eyes away. He held his breath while all the other kids got quiet at the same time.

The stick leapt into the air and started spinning like a majorette's baton. Three times in rapid succession, faster than she could move away, it struck Diane in the face.

"Sinner!" screeched Miss Damon as Diane, her nose and mouth red with blood, slumped to the floor. Jerry couldn't tell; he thought she might be dead.

The stick did cartwheels from desktop to desktop, tapping rhythmically, dancing, pausing unpredictably to rap someone in the temple.

Kids cried, screamed for their parents.

Without leaving his seat, Jerry pushed his entire deak backward a few inches at a time. Its metal legs scratched loudly on the tile floor. He could feel the vibration, but knew no one could hear it above the cries of his terrified classmates.

Now the stick had stopped whirling. It hovered parallel with the floor, a ropeless trapeze, gliding over the heads of the cowering children. It seemed to dare them to move.

Jerry pushed his desk back another inch.

Miss Damon dropped to her knees in the aisle, clenched hands against her mouth, her eyes tightly closed. "Thank you, dear Lord, for all your gifts, and for rewarding me with this magnificent display of your majesty. Thank you for the children, Lord. And thank you for when love—"

The rubber sole of Jerry's sneaker squeaked on the floor as he retreated another inch. Now he could almost make it to the rear stairway. Almost . . .

The horizontal walking stick floated toward Miss Damon. "Thank you for your love-"

Ever so gently, almost like a caress, the stick placed itself under her chin.

And leapt upward, lifting the old woman into the air, dropping her on her back atop the teacher's desk.

Jerry wasn't sure what happened next. When Miss Damon went down, he jumped up. Two rapid steps brought him to the bottom of the stairs. He risked a quick look back, just to be sure the stick wasn't following him.

What he saw was to be a puzzle etched forever on his memory.

Either the stick was lying beside Miss Damon on the desktop, resting against her leg, and partially hidden within the folds of her clothing, or-and Jerry didn't hazard a second look to make sure—it had actually transformed itself into a snake and was crawling underneath Miss Damon's skirt.

The confusing picture was vivid in his mind as he raced up the back steps and into the church.

- CD



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EAST COAST AVIATOR Magazine



DOUGLAS E. WINTER

NIGHT LETTERS

RUBY RAIN

Anticipation: Waiting and hoping, wondering with the eyes and heart of a child . . . the promise of spring, the summer crop of film releases, the fall list of books dark and dangerous, and then the stuff of Christmas. The best is vet to come, we are told; it is yet to come. But all too often what comes is disappointment, particularly in popular entertainment, where the prospect of a new work by a favorite writer or filmmaker now rarely can be matched by the work itself. In the postmodern pall of information overload, where we have entertainment news, and even entertainment about entertainment, each coming attraction is previewed and reviewed to the extent that we often know so much about a book or film or video that, when we finally have the chance to experience it, there is little room for surprise or wonder. We are told what we will enjoy or dislike, deny or denounce, what we should rent, what we should boycott, what we should ignore.

Deprived of the need to exercise our own imaginations, we sit in mindless confirmation of the judgement of others . . . or we become serial readers and viewers, eagerly consuming each new work by our admired, without discretion, just as we eat without thinking at any and every McDonald's, knowing that the burgers and fries. though by no means particularly tasteful or wholesome, will be pretty much the same wherever we eat them. Hence we find ourselves surrounded by artists and entertainers who, like Dean R. Koontz or New Line Cinema with its interminable Nightmares on Elm Street, are nothing less than manufacturers, whose redeeming virtue is not so much quality as quality controlthe ability to deliver not necessarily great, not even necessarily good, but simply consistent project year after year after year.

How else can we even begin to understand the desperate folly of Dario Argento's Trauma (1993)? Argento's first feature-length film since Opera (1987), and his first "American" film, Trauma has been awaited eagerly by an ever-growing number of enthusiasts, critics and Hollywood moneymen—and, like John Woo's American debut, Hard Target (1993), was certain, in its concession to the cashbox, to dis-

appoint the dichard fans. But unlike Hard Target, which played with, not into, its limitations, Argento's film is trauma indeed, the mercilessly mundane descent of a furious stylistic genius into the alldevouring maw of movies American-style.

Filmed in Minneapolis under the working title "Aura's Enigma." Trauma is stridently American, from setting to cast (Piper Laurie, Frederic Forrest, Brad Dourif) to script (co-written with T.E.D. Klein, one of American horror fiction's best and brightest writers). The stratagem is a stunning failure, with a bland backdrop, uneven acting, and a bent and broken storyline that feeds ruthlessly upon Argento's earlier films, with scenes cannibalized from the likes of Profondo Rosso ("Deep Red") (1975) and Phenomena ("Creepers") (1985). The bitter irony is that, despite its concessions to the dull American dream-and, indeed, probably because of them-Trauma has not yet obtained even a directto-video release in the United States.

Trauma opens with a deft transition, the image of a lizardset free by bloodstained diva Betty in the closing scene of Opera—now trapped again, caged, an omen of a returning cycle of violence. Through a veil of rain, the most pervasive of a deluge of water symbols, emerges that relentless icon of the Argento oeuvre—the blackglowed cipher—to murder a nurse-chiropractor. It is, we soon learn, the psychotic killer who haunts Minneapolis, crippling victims and then dispatching them with a mechanized wire noose, severing and taking their heads.

The next day, graphic artist David Parson (Christopher Rydell) rescues teenaged waif Aura Petrescu (played by the director's daughter Asia) from an apparent suicide at the joist of a bridge. Sometime lover of career-minded television anchor Grace Harrington (Laura Johnson), David is a recovered drug addict and the most recent incarnation of Argento's knight errant-the crippled artist who strives to resolve the puzzle parts of reality, heir apparent to Sam Dalmas (Tony Musante), the burned-out American writer of L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo ("The Bird with the Crystal Plumage") (1969), and pianist Marcus Daly (David Hemmings) of Profundo Rosso. Aura, in turn, is the little girl lost, the pubescent fairytale princess of Argento's tarot, who, like Susy Bannion (Jessica Harper) of Suspiria (1977), Jennifer Corvino (Jennifer Connelly) of Phenomena and Betty (Cristina Marsillach) of Opera, denies her inner power and must succumb to evil-and adulthood-in order to survive.

Fate weds David and Aura in a mystery of murder and melancholia. Aura, the streetwise child of wealthy but neglectful parents, has just escaped from the Faraday Clinic, a highbrow psychiatric retreat to which she was committed because of her anorexia. She steals David's wallet, and moments later is herself stolen away from him, when juvenile division police officers pluck her from the street and return her to another prison—her parents' suburban manor.

Adriana Petrescu, the wicked stepmother of *Trauma*, is played by Piper Laurie like Daria Nicolodi on

> ... where the shadow of the killer stalks away, her parents' heads raised on high like obscene trophies.

absinthe. A professional psychic, Adriana urges henpecked husband Stefan (Dominique Serrano) to lock Aura away in a bedroom evrie while she conducts a crucial evening seance. The affair is attended by a melange of mendicants, including the noxious, neckbraced Dr. Leopold Judd (Frederic Forrest), director of the Faraday Clinic. As a violent rainstorm engulfs the house, Adriana calls the seance to order, summoning her spirit guide, Nicholas; but in a vivid echo of the psychic reading that opens Profundo Rosso, another soul speaks from the ether-a voice seared with suffering, the voice of the recent dead: "My head . . . took my head . . . murdered me," she announces. "A monster with a noose." After a dire warning-"I wasn't the first . . . and I won't be the last"-the voice reveals: "I know who the killer is . . . I'm the only one who knows The killer is . . . here!"

Adriana runs screaming from the house into the woods outside, and first Stefan, then Aura, follow. In the rainswept darkness, Stefan stumbles upon a headless female corpse; then the wire noose cuts at his neck. Moments later, Aura finds both bodies and looks with terror into the ruby rain, where the shadow of the killer stalks away, her parents' heads raised on high like obscene trophies.

"I didn't see anything," she tells Dr. Judd in the aftermath; but of course she saw something—something significant, so significant that sight alone is insufficient to make it known. It is this imperfect vision that lies at the very heart of Trauma, like so many of its predecessors, exercising Argento's unrelenting obsession with the persistence of vision, the persistence of memory.

As the "Headhunter" muders become the lead stories of Grace Harrington's news bulletins, Aura cludes both Judd and the police, turning to her only hope, David, for help. He soon realizes that she is anorexic as well as suical—a subplot apparently derived from Argento's experiences with his own daughters. (The script, notably, lays blame for the condition on an "unstable mother complex").

A brief, chaste love affair between David and Aura is sundered when the jealous Grace reports Aura's whereabouts to Dr. Judd. With Aura back in the custody of the Faraday Clinic, Judd, intent on having her confront the past, forces her to taste of a hallucinogenic berry. "Each human being's head contains the soul," he tells her. "The one remaining riddle in the universe. Look inside the head, unlock the memory, and the universe lies open like a map." But Judd is wrong; he has confused head and heart, body and soul. Aura's trippy regression unlocks only the memory of Judd and her mother making love, then her parents' deaths on that rainy night, And again, seeing only rain and blood and shadow, Aura insists: "I didn't see anything."

That evening, the rain re-

turns, and both David and the killer invade the Faraday Clinic; as David rescues Aura, the killer beheads another nurse—and the threads of the mystery begin to ravel. David and Aura find a snapshot in the victim's possessions, smiling nurses and a doctor—most of them now dead and missing their heads. Those who remain must include the Headhunter—or the next to die.

Here, at last, Trauma finds a perverse animation, twisting itself into a hyperdelic slasher film, embracing the fiercely dramatic setpieces that have so often defined and distinguished Argento's work. Another nurse meets her fate in a consummately choreographed motel-room massacre, with the killer subverting a day of bright sunshine by igniting a newspaper to set off the indoor sprinkler system. covering the victim with rain. But after David's hapless rendezvous with the physician from the photo, Dr. Lloyd (a splendidly psychotic Brad Dourif), the plot, what there is of one, tumbles downhill in vagary and confusion. Although never known for narrative coherence-and, indeed, championed for the nightmarish illogic of Suspiria and Inferno (1980)-Argento keeps pushing to find a story here, as if painfully aware that, unlike his masterworks, the ever-contorting narrative of Trauma lacks even visual justification . . . or vindication.

Raffaele Mertes's cinematography is clever, but offers little of the sustained visual excitement that marks Argento's best work. To be sure, there is a quotient of eye-widening delights-steadicams mounted upside down and sent rotating through police barricades, quirky butterfly's-eye views of humanity, a nastily orchestrated elevator murder-but they seem mere parlor tricks in the context of the elaborate camerawork of Tenebrae (1982) or Opera. Tom Savini's special makeup effects are likewise tame, unexceptional; indeed, save for fleeting closeups of the wire noose at work on rubber flesh, the violence of *Trauma* is remarkably subdued: pale, not deep, red.

The result is Argento becalmed, a shopping mall, made-fortv perversion of his talents that only underscores his weaknesses as filmmaker-and signals a seeming surrender to the malaise that has afflicted peers like George A. Romero and David Cronenberg as middle age (or the Millennium) approaches. The only redeeming virtue of Trauma is Argento's guileless obsession-and, though perhaps mere wishful thinking, an apparent reconciliation and summation of the passion that has so haunted his work.

Judd sneaks into David's lakeside bungalow, daring to capture Aura again, but David awakens to thwart him. When the police arrive—just one of many fortuitous turns of events—their brief pursuit sends Judd's car careening out of control. The crash bursts his body, and the auto's trunk, scattering a harvest of human heads onto the ground.

After Judd gasps out his dying words-"I loved her"-David returns home to find a suicide note from Aura: she has gone to join her mother. He rushes to the lake, her empty dress at its silent shore. Diving again and again into the water, searching desperately, he finds nothing; she is indeed gone. When he awakens in a hospital bed. Grace looks down on himfrom a television screen, reporting Judd's death, and the famed psychiatrist's "ghoulish" preoccupation with the occult. "One thing is clear," Grace advises her viewing public: "The nightmare is over."

Which means, in the world of Dario Argento, that the nightmare has only begun. Without Aura, David is nothing; he loses job and home, reverts to drugs, staggers like a beggar along the uncaring city streets. Finally huddled on the sidewalk in helpless squalor, he spies a woman wearing a bracelet like Aura's and follows her home. Dreamwalking from the realm of skyscrapers into the tract houses of suburban America, he again finds Aura—alive, if not well—and together they confront the secret of the rain and the killer.

"I should have seen the truth." Aura tells him, "It was right in front of my face." Spoken at last, this is the most profound of Argento's maxims, the key to his cinema, which is less one of voyeurism than of the ultimate futility of the eve (and thus, it would seem, the camera): the lament of seeing and yet not seeing, of knowing and yet not knowing, of being unable to face the truth, to see through the blinders of one's own imagination, until it is too late. It is in this particular moment that the giallo of Dario Argento are defined, once and for all-not as a cinema of detection, or one of revelation, and certainly not as a cinema about seeing, watching; but one, in the final trumps, of the inability to face, to see, to know, to embrace, the truth. (If only his story's finale could have matched this revelation, then perhaps Trauma could have transcended its tepid trappings. Instead, the killer's identity comes less as a surprise than as a sigh, and the secret of Aura's vision on the night of the murders is less stunning than silly.)

When David and Aura walk up out of the final darkness, questions from police and reporters surround her, but she has no answers, only the knowledge that her eyes alone could not show her truth—that this fragile vision must come from someplace deep within ... the heart, the soul. "It's over,"

David tells her; and perhaps, at last, for Dario Argento, it is indeed over. Perhaps in this flawed film he has managed to integrate the icons that have tormented his cinematic vision—the wounded artist and lost little girl—and somehow to exorcise their sway over his crea-

tive genius. Perhaps.

For now, we can only wait to learn . . . with anticipation.

Trauma (Video Search of Miami, P.O. Box 16-1917, Miami, FL 33116; \$27.90 per videotape, postage paid). Viewers eager to experience Dario Argento's Trauma, or those interested in witnessing first hand the genealogy of a film, may wish to consider the multiple versions of Trauma now available to clients of Video Search of Miami. First is a very poor copy of the Italian theatrical release print, mildly letterboxed, with rather haphazard English subtitles added by VSoM. (Among many subtitling gaffes are the rendition of Aura as "Laura" and Grace Harrington as "Grace Allen," even though each name is listed in the closing credits, and the witless "translation" of words spoken in English, which produces such oddities as "warehouse" being subtitled as "wallhouse.") More interesting, and watchable, is VSoM's copy of Argento's American work print, which is letterboxed at the correct aspect ratio and has English dialogue, principally from scratch track recordings, but lacks a musical score (using temp tracks apparently selected by Argento). The work print includes footage that was later cut from the Italian theatrical release, but is missing some optical inserts and the opening titles and end credits. Finally, the hardcore Argentophile may want to indulge in VSoM's four-tape set of dailies from Trauma, and thus view, in letterboxed glory, such niceties as repeated takes of key murders. As this bounty suggests. Video Search of Miami is indeed the leader in finding and furnishing obscure and rare video; its catalog is abundant, and its service is impeccable.

Trauma: The Orchestral Score. By Pino Donaggio (RCA Cinevox, compact disc; import, price varies). Although an official video release of Trauma may not be available to American audieinces for a long time, the Italian compact disc of Pino Donaggio's soundtrack has appeared in some New York re-

cord stores and in soundtrack specialty shops throughout the coun-It is Argento's least characteristic score, bereft of the shriek of heavy metal guitars or the synthesizer-driven shockwaves of Claudio Simonetti and Goblin, Instead. Donaggio, who is best known for his work with Brain De Palma, evokes the seemingly inescapable shadow of his master. Bernard Herrmann, in stolidly orchestral cues-some of them uncomfortably playful-constructed around a haunting title theme. "Ruby Rain." Indeed, the album's highlight is the Enva-like vocal performance of "Ruby Rain" by Laura Evan, which captures the dire melancholy at the heart of Trauma. (An Enya vocal, as well as cues from Basic Instinct, Darkman and Nightbreed, was used by Argento in the temp tracks of Trauma). Although better as an album than as film accompaniment. Donaggio's score, like the film itself, is certain to disappoint the admirers of Dario Argento.

Next issue: Meng & Ecker.



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TYSON BLUE

NEEDFUL KINGS & OTHER THINGS

Two brief items of business before we get to the news: first off, welcome to all you new subscribers who've come to us from BOMC's Stephen King Library program. I wish this was a month when there was a lot of King news to report, but there's not a whole lot going on right now. But that should change very soon...

Next, I want to draft you all into my nifty new club, the King-Watchers of the World. No entry fee, no badges, no newsletter. What you do to join is to spot a news item about Stephen King in a magazine, newspaper, TV show, anything. Send us a photocopy of the entire article and the cover of the publication, and send it to:

> Kingwatch c/o Tyson Blue 4521 Lewis Road Walworth, NY 14568

If you send an item we use, you'll get your name in this column. Submissions cannot be returned, and please don't send in articles from Entertainment Weekly — I read that regularly.

There's a new King short story on the market — sort of. Entitled "Jhonathan and the Witchs," it can be found in the pages of First Words: Earliest Writings of Favorite Contemporary Authors, a new anthology from Algonquin. The story is short, less than two full pages, and concerns a young cobbler's son who takes advantage of three wishes granted him by a good fairy disguised as a rabbit to vanquish three evil witches and win his fortune.

What's really significant about this story is that it was written when King was nine years old! When approached a couple of years back by editor Paul Mandelbaum to contribute a story, King began searching, and came up with this newly-discovered bit of juvenilia, written for his Aunt Gert, his "first patron," who enjoyed his youthful tales and paid him a quarter apiece, causing her to be deluged with them. We can only hope that further youthful exercises will surface in the future.

Other authors in the book familiar to King fans include the late Isaac Asimov, Rock Bottom Remainderette Amy Tan, Michael Crichton and many more, about forty in all. This is a unique opportunity to see how many of America's best writers got started, and is one you shouldn't miss.

While you're between volumes of the audio version of Nightmares and Dreamscapes, you might want to check out BDD Audio's series of tapes collecting the Night Shift stories. The first three-tape set, entitled "Gray Matter and Other Stories from Night Shift," is in bookstores now for \$22.00. The stories are read with minimal music by actor John Glover, who also read the audio version of Clive Barker's The Thief of Always. This first set contains "Gray Matter," The Boogeyman," "I Know What You Need," "Strawberry Spring," "The Woman in the Room," and "Battleground." All readings are unabridged.

Those of you who have the old Warner Audio boxed set "Stories from Stephen King's Night Shift" will note that "The Boogeyman,""I Know What You Need" and "Strawberry Spring" appeared on that earlier set, now long out of print, albeit read by different people. Glover's readings are fine, but he affects an annoying lisp on the first two tapes. This, however, is the only flaw I noticed.

The second set of tapes, "Graveyard Shift and Other Stories from Night Shift," will be released in June 1994.

The publication of Nightmares and Dreamscapes completes the legendary four-book deal between King and Viking, and so it should come as no surprise that the author recently reached a new agreement with Viking Yenguin for three

new novels, with book-club rights going once more to the Book-ofthe-Month Club. For those who keep track of such things, specific money details are unfortunately unavailable.

According to a recent news squib, he also became a fan of MTV's "Beavis and Butthead," so perhaps we can look forward to that long-awaited sequel to *Firestarter* sometime soon...

In the meantime, though, king completists might want to pick up a copy of the paperback edition of *Dolores Claiborne*, released this fall by NAL. The book features a new introduction by King, which works to strengthen the tie between this novel and *Gerald's Game*, and is a pretty nice piece of regional writing, as well.

On the "everything old is new again" front, there's some hot new news regarding an old King-related project. The ZBS Foundation production of Dennis Etchison's adaptation of King's novella, "The Mist," originally released in a limited-edition chrome cassette in 1985, was later mass-marketed by Simon & Schuster AudioWorks under the title "The Mist in 3-D Sound"

In September, the program was released in a new, digitally-remastered edition on compact disc. The deluxe package, marketed as "The Nightmare Edition," will offer what is arguably the finest audio adaptation of King's work, and the only audio dramatization to date, to a whole new audience.

Recorded in the innovative Kunstkopf binaural system, which features twin microphones positioned like ears on a head-shaped mount, it provides an eerily-realistic sound when listened to with headphones. The CD edition, which lacks the tape-hiss of the earlier editions, creates an even more powerful experience, and is well worth the \$15.00 purchase price even for those who already have the tape. I have also had problems with the AudioWorks tapes jamming and being eaten by various tapeplayers on which I've listened to them, and this is also eliminated by the CD release.

In other news, Bett's Bookstore (located in Bangor, Maine) owners Stu and Penney are considering reviving a certain Stephen King Newsletter you might recall; more on this as it develops...

I don't know how it was omitted from last issue's review, but Peter Straub's excellent novel The Throat is even more enjoyable when you read it in the deluxe limited edition from Borderlands Press. This handsomely designed volume features completely reset type from the Dutton trade edition, is signed and numbered by Straub, and features the author's preferred text of this pivotal novel in his "Blue Rose" cycle of novels and short stories. The differences are small between the two editions. but they are there.

The cover is painted by Ryan Dreimiller, and I can attest to its power. At this past year's World Horror Convention, I worked security at the art room, and was positioned across from the original painting for hours at a time. The dead, white eyes of the soldier who dominates the cover bored into me as if they were alive.

The volume is still in stock at \$95.00, and can be obtained from Borderlands Press, P.O. Box 32333, Baltimore, MD 21208, or call 800-528-3310 for faster service.

Take one woman and her two children on the run from a brutal husband and a legal system which will not help her, hiding out in bleak, wintry Santa Fe, New Mexico. Add one former husband on the run from Colorado authorities after he savaegly murders his wife and two children, hiding out in bleak, wintry Santa Fe, New Mexico. Lightly season with a guilt-rid-

den social worker hellbent on revenge, a religious zealot ex-FBI child-finder, an old Indian, and a few extra surprises, cook at fever heat for about 350 pages and you've got a novel that'll keep you turning pages until you're done.

She How She Runs is the latest thriller from Matthew I. Costello. and continues his move into thriller territory, begun last year with Homecoming. In this novel, as in Homecoming, Costello takes a series of seemingly disconnected threads - hell, they are disconnected! - and seamlessly weaves them together with the inexorability of fate. The pacing is near-flawless as he moves from character to character, never letting up the tension, until the ending finds you helpless to stop reading, and as desperate to reach the end as his characters themselves are.

Matt Costello continues to grow as a writer with each and every book; this is one you must not miss.

Now, take one woman and two children on the run from a brutal husband — not hers — and a legal system which will not helper, hiding out in bleak, autumnal Portland, Maine. Add one ghostly appartition, a lady in blue, who continually appears to the youngest child, and one former husband on the run from authorities in the Midwest after he has brutally murdered his wife and brother-in-law, and you've got another novel that'll keep you turning pages frantically until you're finished.

Ghost Light is the latest from Richard Light is the latest from Robert End as Blue Lady in his interview which ran in these pages a few issues back. Although starting from the same basic ground as the Costello novel, this book takes off in a completely different direction, as Hautala weaves a chase novel of epic proportions, featuring one of the most dogged and soulless villains he has ever created.

Like his last two novels, this one could operate just fine without the supernatural element of the mysterious ghost who haunts Cindy Toland and her makeshift family. However, Hautala has often said that he feels most comfortable in the horror milieu, and so long as he keeps turning out novels this good, he can stick in all the ghosts he wants!

Be warned, though: Ghast Light features the worst cover I've ever seen on a book — it almost defies you to find it on the shelfl But what's inside is what counts, and as always, Hautala delivers in spades!

David Morrell is back after a two-year absence from the shelves with Assumed Identity, a thriller which explores what happens when a man who wants to be anyone other than himself, and gets that wish, is suddenly forced into a situation where becoming anyone other than himself could be fatal. Confusing? Hal Wait'll you get to the novel.

Brendan Buchanan is an agent of a mysterious government agency. His specialty is undercover operations which require him to assume the identities of other persons. Since he doesn't like himself very much anyway, for reasons he can no longer recall, this is easy. But when one of his assignments goes very sour very fast, he finds himself on the run not only from implacable foes seeking to kill him, but from his former employers as well, since he has become a liability to them.

Along with a female reporter who has caught on to his game, Buchanan begins searching for a former colleague who has managed to send him a call for help. Along the way, their chase criss-crosses North and Central America, and we learn what makes Brendan run, and may even learn

what all of this has to do with a missing opera star and a lost Mayan city in the jungles of the Yucatan.

With his usual breakneck pacing, superb storytelling skills and flawless characterization, Morrell delivers another surefire winner, and one you should make room for on your reading schedule very soon.

If true crime is your bag, you might want to seek out *The Diary of Jack the Ripher*, an intriguing book from Hyperion Publishing. As you may be aware, recently a document surfaced in England under mysterious circumstances, purporting to be a handwritten diary by the most infamous serial killer of all time.

Although opinions are split upon whether or not the diary is genuine - arguments pro and con are offered within the book for your consideration - the diary remains a fascinating book. Along with a facsimile of the diary and a transcript for those who cannot decipher the handwriting, there is a long narrative by writer Shirley Harrison, detailing her investigation of the diary and the Ripper murders, comparing the timelines of the crimes with events in the life of James Maybrick, a Liverpool cotton merchant who just might be one of history's most famous villains, and who was himself the victim of possible foul play in 1889.

Whether you conclude that Maybrick was or was not Jack the Ripper, The Diary of Jack the Ripper is must reading for anyone interested in these classic murders. And judging from the number of horror writers who have tried their hand at solving the mystery in their own way over the years, that should number quite a few people.

That's all for now. Much more King news next issue . . . I promise!

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WEIGHT

DOMINICK CANCILLA

DOMINICK CANCILLA is a promising newcomer from Santa Monica, California. His short fiction is starting to appear in many genre publications, and the following tale of terror is his second appearance in Cemetery Dance (his short-short tale, "Picture This" ran in the Summer 1992 Issue).

Scraps had been a loving and faithful companion for more than six years, and as Alex knelt on the fire escape holding a gun to the dog's head, he shook with revulsion.

The dog had been a birthday gift for Melissa, Alex's youngest. She'd picked it out herself from a dozen or so spaniel pups at the pet store, and Alex had invested a tidy sum in dog food and veterinary visits since that time.

Scraps was like part of the family, but she had gained a pound and a quarter over the last month and could no longer be trusted.

Alex steeled his nerves and pulled the trigger.

The dog's body shivered and collapsed. The .38 was powerful enough to kill the animal instantly at such close range, and the blast sent shards of bone and blobs of grey matter flying off in all directions, leaving a thin red mist floating in the air behind them. Blood and flesh sprayed up the barrel of the gun and over Alex's hands and rubber apron.

Alex was covered by more of the mess than he was used to, probably because he had been so close to the dog when he fired, and the sudden backwash of red caused him to stand and jump back, dropping the gun to the fire escape's grilled floor. His gloved hands moved quickly through the redness on his chest, hoping to find nothing more than dog remains.

The blood ran down the front of Alex's apron and nothing more. Only blood.

A blush of emotion washed over Alex as he realized his stupidity. If the animal had been further along, if the blood had been intermingled with more than brains and matter hair...

Alex looked down at Scraps, lying beside the revolver with blood coming from her nose and mouth. One emotionless brown eye stared up at him. The scent of gunpowder floated in the air.

Scraps had fallen with the damaged side of her head down, and Alex allowed himself to imagine that she was whole, despite the evidence splattered across the fire escape railing.

With loving care, Alex picked up his daughter's pet and lay her in the mouth of the propane barbecue which stood behind him. He scrubbed the gun and fire escape with alcohol, and put the dirty rags alongside Scraps, followed by his gloves and apron.

After a silent prayer, he lit the barbecue.



Alex cleaned off his overshoes with alcohol and a scrub brush before going back into the apartment. He was tired, emotionally drained, and being alone only made his emotions more intense. He knew it was necessary to send Ann and the girls to the McPhearson's for a few hours while he did what he had to do, but that knowledge was no consolation to him now.

He dropped into the easy chair he loved most and pulled a magazine from the ragged pile of aging periodicals on the floor beside him. Time's cover story "Life Only For The Thin?" was old news. Alex had read it a dozen times, always hoping to find some new bit of information, and always being disappointed. Time offered nothing but rumor, innuendo and pleas for patience and restraint.

Restraint could lead to death and tragedy, Alex knew. It was a thing of the past.

The smell of burning hair and flesh oozed into the apartment, interrupting Alex's self-depreciating musings. The stench made Alex feel dirty, and kept the memory of what he had done fresh in his mind. The grainy pictures of dry, hole-riddled people and overweight women being executed suddenly became too real for comfort. Alex dropped the magazine, got up from his recliner and headed for the bathroom where relaxation could be found in the form of a hot bath.

The plumbing was still working, and Alex watched with pleasure as the bathtub filled with hot water. He undressed slowly, luxuriously, laying his clothes across the toilet seat. The air filled with steam from the bath, clearing Alex's head.

Standing naked, Alex poured two cups of vinegar into the filling bathtub to take care of anything which was not killed by the heat.

Alex decided to get a quick shave in before bathing, all the better to feel clean afterwards. He got his razor and a bar of soap from the drawer in the sink cabinet, and used a forearm to brush a clear spot in the bathroom mirror.

When Alex's face appeared in the reflective surface, he dropped the shaving supplies to the floor and shivered with horror.

Alex had never been a handsome man. He had tried to distract attention from premature baldness and a face pockmarked by acne during high-school with a full beard, but it was not well cared for. His nose had been broken twice and there was a small scar through his right eyebrow. The blood which dotted his face, and the few clots of Scraps' tissue which hung from his beard did nothing to improve the picture.

His eyes wide with fear, Alex ran to the fire escape for the alcohol. When he pulled open the sliding door, his eyes and nose were assaulted by thick, black smoke, driven into the apartment by a summer updraft. Ignoring these as best he could, Alex serubbed his face and chest with the alcohol, pouring it into his nose, rinsing out his mouth, and dousing his ears. He stopped only when the bottle was empty.

What a fool he had been! He should have worn the welder's mask, should have put on more clothing, should have shot the dog from a distance like he usually did.

When he killed other creatures, Alex killed them where they stood and let their owners, or family, clean up after them. He didn't want to be near a potentially infested animal long enough to take it to a neutral area. For this reason, he never even thought to take Scraps into one of the abandoned apartments or to some other location, someplace where he wouldn't have to worry about people picking up a living egg.

More doubts went through Alex's mind. Had he scrubbed every surface? Was their some infested piece of the dog waiting for him, hiding in some corner?

Scraps had been so like a member of the family that Alex, deep in his soul, had not been convinced that the animal could be a danger. He had touched it, gotten close to it, even after he knew that it might be a carrier. That was a mistake, one that he swore he would never make again.

The wind changed, pulling the smoke away from the building. Alex stood naked on the fire escape, his eyes tearing, his legs and arms shaking with fear. Orange flames swirled about a charred jumble of bones in the barbecue, but Alex could see only a blur. On unsure feet, he felt his way back into the apartment and collapsed into his easy chair. With his face in his hands. Alex sobbed.



While Alex wept, the bathtub overflowed. He managed to catch it before the water did any real damage, but it was enough to completely ruin an otherwise horrible day. By the time he had recovered from his shock, cleaned up the bathroom and gotten dressed, there was barely time to shovel what remained of Scraps into a Hefty bag before Ann and the kids got home.

With the windows and doors all open, the acrid smell began to fade and Alex found some measure of composure. He stood on the fire escape, staring at the street below, trying to remember how things had been before.

There had been a time when Sixth was one of the busiest streets downtown and one had to wait months, if not years, to get an apartment anywhere in the area. Now only a few cars crawled by below, and only a handful of the two hundred apartments in Alex's building were occupied.

Most of the apartments visible from Alex's balcony were dark both day and night, and signs of life were few. Across the street and three stories down a man in a blue bathrobe stood cooking what looked like hamburgers on his own balcony barbecue. Alex had seen thick, oily smoke from that same barbecue on more than one occasion. He hardly even noticed such things anymore.

The whole business had seemed like nothing more than an interesting bit of world news at first. The damage seemed to be limited to derelicts and transients, all in faraway parts of the country. Nobody cared. It had been easy to say that cool heads should prevail. Charity organizations jumped on the bandwagon, the President was asked to provide research funds, there were marches, and telethons, and concerts. Everyone patted themselves on the back for being socially conscious, and made sure to cross the street when a homeless person approached.

Then a few shelters were wiped out completely, social workers and volunteers started to be affected. Then nurses, doctors, police officers, even people who just jogged through the park on weekday mornings were dying, and taking their families with them. When white, middle-class Americans started to be affected, tolerance fell by the wayside and panic set in.

It was open season on poor people, and the police turned a blind eye as nameless hundreds were murdered in the name of public good. Then more details of the condition came to light and things went from bad to worse. Anyone with a weight problem was suddenly in danger. Homicide rates skyrocketed, the city went berserk.

Never one to believe the popular press, Alex had written the whole thing off as hysteria. He could believe that the poor, the unwashed, the uneducated were being affected, but not regular, healthy people like him, not families like his. By the time he got it through his head that the city was unsafe, it was too late. He'd lost his job, the company credit union had folded, his car had been stolen during the August Exodus, there was nothing left. If he wanted to leave, he'd have to do it on foot, and that meant putting his family at the mercy of a city full of unclean and unknown surfaces. They wouldn't last a week.

In all the world, the only place that Alex truly trusted was his own apartment. He knew every inch of floor space, every nock and cranny, and all of it was spotlessly clean. The same could be said of the McPhearson's place down the hall, and of the floor and walls which connected the two apartments.

The only time that Alex ever left the safe, clean areas was when he, Ann and Angus McPhearson went on their weekly "shopping" trips. He always felt silly walking through the downtown area dressed with gloves, thick clothing and his old welder's helmet protecting every inch of skin from potential human contact, but he'd learned long ago that it was far better to feel foolish now than to die later.

A key turned in the front door, telling Alex that his family was home. Ann stuck her head to see if the coast was clear before letting the children in, and was reassured by her husband's smiling face as he came to greet her.

The children came close behind their mother, and made sure that the door was closed and bolted behind them.

Alex opened his arms for a communal hug. "How was it at the McPhearson's?" he asked, hoping to sound cheerful. There was no reason to include his kids in the gloom which had overtaken him.

Melissa, the youngest, spoke first. "It was neat, Dad. They have cartoon videos and Lisa had a cold but we made popcorn in the microwave all by ourselves!"

"Wow, that's great," said Alex. Melissa seemed oblivious to what had been going on in her absence and that pleased him. Ann had been calm when the dog's weight started to rise, and did not mention it to the girls. Small weight fluctuations happened all the time, particularly in animals, and there was no need to make a fuss before it was necessary. When they realized that the dog's weight was not going to go back down, they decided to pretend that the dog had simply died. Gone to Dog Heaven and all that. They would

wait as long as possible to tell the tale.

Melissa would be saddened by the news, of course. She would wonder about the dog, and cry when she realized it was gone forever, but these were relatively small hurdles. The important thing was that she believe the little lie, and Melissa was too young to think of doubting her parents.

Katie was another story.

When Alex looked at his oldest daughter, he saw hatch. She was only seven years old, but there was a lifetime of betrayal in her eyes. Alex didn't know how much she knew, or whether she really understood what had happened, but he knew that, in time, the girls would come to understand what he had done.



That night as Alex lay in bed, his wife snoring softly beside him and the children long ago weighed and tucked in, he found sleep elusive. He had seen and done more horrible, distasteful things in the last few months than he cared to remember, and they were finally starting to sink in.

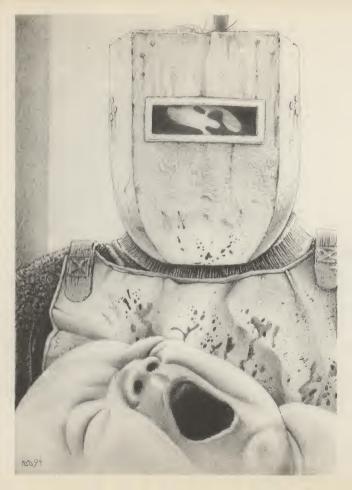
Before the market turned sour, Alex had been a construction foreman. He was strong, both physically and emotionally, which made up for his rather average intelligence. It was these characteristics coupled with his generosity and confidence that brought people to him when the time came for unsafe loved ones to be put to rest.

Back when the building was fully occupied, the apartment across the hall had been occupied by the Lenowskis, Mike and Julia. Alex had known Mike from college, and had dated Julia a few times before meeting Ann. They were wonderful neighbors, just as the McPhearsons were. The six of them used to get to gether to play pinochle every month; these days it was builder.

Just as the first few downtown-area bums were starting to die, Mike and Julia had a child. It was a beautiful baby, round and active with a thin head of blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. Ann's maternal instincts had been aroused and endless hours of cooing over the infant followed.

When the baby was a few weeks old, Mike started to get nervous. He stopped eating regularly and worked a lot of late hours at the office. Julia conflided to Ann that she thought her husband was having an affair, but Alex knew differently. Mike was worried about the baby.

Babies, all children in fact, had been a problem from the first. They sometimes grew fast naturally, and sometimes they didn't, making it hard for a parent to judge. The rumor mill was full of paranoid stories which told in graphic detail of fat infants bursting in the night, killing their parents, their siblings, their



neighbors.

The baby was ten weeks old when Mike finally cracked.

"I love my wife, Alex," Mike had said, standing in the doorway with two days beard and a new revolver held loosely in his hand. "I love her more than anything and I can't let anything happen to her." His hands were raw from constant rubbing, and his speech punctuated by long pauses. "We can have another child. Soon. I love my son. I just . . . I love my wife more."

Fat tears rolled down Mike's cheeks and his voice hitched. "I can't stand the thought of Julia dying that way. I just can't. And the baby, the baby's getting so big."

Silence hung heavy in the air while Mike tried to compose himself. "I can't do it myself, Alex, and you're the only person we can trust. Julia . . . " He'd broken off there, overwhelmed by emotion. Mike pressed the gun into Alex's hand and started dragging him out of the apartment, toward the half open apartment door across the hall.

Alex hadn't known what to do. The best plan he could formulate was to take the baby away, say he was going to get rid of it and give it to a church or something. Mike was too far gone to be trusted around the child any more.

The Lenowski's apartment was a mess. Books. glasses, clothing were strewn about the floor; the couch had been pulled away from the wall; a portable radio stuck out of a jagged hole in the picture tube of Mike's new television. Julia was nowhere to be seen, but Alex thought he could see a formless something lying still on the floor in the darkened bedroom down the hall. He did not investigate further.

Only the baby's crib seemed to be untouched by whatever storm had hit the room.

Lying in its bassinet, surrounded by padded blue fabric and ruffles, the baby looked completely innocent. It smiled up at Alex, cooing and drooling. The child wasn't even strong enough to roll over, and here was its father crying for it to die.

Nobody knew how to tell true fat from the outside, they still don't. It was possible, even probable, that there was nothing wrong with the baby, but as Alex looked down he found himself in an emotional struggle. He wanted to save the blameless child from the hysteria overtaking its parents, but what if he did and turned out to be wrong? What if the child really was infested? A child's hands go everywhere; there might already be eggs clinging to its skin, its hair, its crib, its toys. If Alex picked it up, he could be infested himself. And then his family.

Alex thought of how Ann would look, her face bulging, her slim frame covered with fat, her swollen tongue holding her mouth open. The gun rose and fired before Alex had a chance to stop it.

The bassinet jumped and rolled backwards on casters, the frilly cloth on one side melting from pink to red. Mike screamed and ran to pick up the child. "What have you done!" he screamed as the last beats of a dying heart poured a red stain across his chest and face.

Alex dropped the gun, turned and left without saying anything.

That night Alex was woken from a fitful sleep by a loud report from across the hall. He never saw his neighbors again, and he never ventured into their apartment.

A cold shiver ran through Alex's body as he lay in bed, recounting these events. Since that time he'd done a score of dogs and cats, a few birds, even goldfish. On one occasion he put away a senile old woman, and on another a five-year-old child.

It was never easy, killing a living thing, but not knowing was the worst part. Alex could never be sure that the thing he killed was really infested. He'd heard that you can cut someone open and look to see if they were, but such tests would fail if you looked in the wrong places or if the eggs had not yet begun to hatch, and with medical help so hard to get, the person being checked was just as likely to die of an infection as anything. It was easier just to kill outright and try to forget about it, if you could.

Like Mike's baby, Scraps had probably just gained weight naturally for some reason or another. The dog had been cooped up in the apartment for a long time and couldn't be coaxed to exercise with the rest of the family, and it certainly ate enough. Scraps may or may not have been infested, and Alex would spend the rest of his life wondering.

There was silence within Alex for a few moments, and then he asked himself a question: if Scraps had been infected, how had she gotten to be? There was no sure answer for that question, either.

Nobody was certain where the parasites came from originally, but once in a host they could be transmitted through blood when they were still eggs or through direct contact when fully grown; this was certain. There were rumors that the eggs could be inhaled, or deposited in a drop of sweat, even though scientists in government employ denied it. People tended to avoid physical contact completely these days, and only fools used public toilets or walked barefoot any more.

Adult worms were supposed to be very thin and nearly transparent. They were invisible in a glass of water or on a heavily patterned surface. Their incubation period was uncertain, so Scraps may have picked one up when she was still taken on her twice-daily walks and carried it around with her ever since. If so, had a breeder of parasites been living among them for six months? Perhaps the dog had actually been losing weight at the same time the infestation was gaining? It could have been passing out eggs, or even adults, in its stools for weeks.

The girls took turns cleaning up after the dog.

Alex imagined himself standing with Katie on the balcony, her body bloated, her chin doubled, and her eyes staring up at him with hatred. He could see her head jerk back in slow motion when the gun went off, one of her pigtails torn free, spiraling down toward the street. He could imagine the smell of her burning body as she lay half in and half out of the barbecue with rosy flames dancing through her Sunday dress.

The same thoughts ran over and over through his mind for hours.

It was almost three in the morning when Alex's painful imaginings were interrupted by a pounding on the front door. He had still not slept a wink, and the sheets were caked to his naked body with sweat.

Ann woke up while Alex was putting on a robe, and lights flicked on in the girls' room.

"I'll see what it is," Alex said to his wife, "tell the girls that everything's all right."

Alex finished tying his bathrobe belt on the way to the front door. The pounding didn't stop until he began to undo the latches.

Light from the hallway surprised Alex with its brightness, causing him to squint, but even under these conditions he could see that it was Angus McPhearson standing outside his door.

The look on Angus' face was one of horror. There was no color in his checks, and his jaw hung loose. The words which came out of him were whispered and strained. "It's Lisa, Alex. You've got to help her. She's sick."

A hundred thoughts rushed through Alex's mind. Lisa had been sick when Ann and the girls visited earlier; she'd stayed out of sight. In fact, they'd had to cancel their bridge night that week, and the week before. It didn't take a genius to see that something might be very wrong with Lisa, the woman who took care of Scraps and the girls when Alex and his wife were away.

Fear and lack of sleep pushed Alex toward a hasty decision and stripped him of his inhibitions. Deep in his gut Alex knew that Lisa had more than a bad case of the flu or a nasty virus. He half ran to the desk where his gun was hidden.

At the end of the hallway, the McPhearson's apartment door stood open, and Alex ran toward it with Angus close behind him crying, "You don't need the gun, Alex. She's just sick. Just sick!"

When Alex bounded into the apartment, he saw that this was not the case at all.

Aside from Alex and his family, the McPhearson's were the only people on the floor who had not left

town since the worms arrived. They'd been good neighbors, and good friends, for many, many years, but the Lisa McPhearson who stood before Alex now was someone he hardly knew.

OLisa had propped herself up in the bedroom downway across from Alex, wearing nothing. Only a few weeks before she'd been a slim, athetic woman, but now she was bloated from neck to ankle. The skin on Lisa's legs, arms and stomach was pulled taut and striped with stretch marks; it looked almost as if she could be burst with a pin.

"I didn't know it was going to get like this, Alex," Angus' voice cried from the hallway. "I just thought she was sick, you know. Just sick."

Angus pushed past Alex into the room. "You don't need the gun, Alex," he said. "She just needs medical attention. I thought, you know, that maybe we could put her on a special diet or start doing those exercises you guys do."

A bizarre husky laugh erupted from Lisa. Her mouth spread into a toothy grin and her body shook with hysterics. Alex could see that the skin on her stomach had started to move with more than laughter. He raised the gun.

A convulsion wracked Lisa's body, and another, each followed by a yell and more deep, maniacal laughter. Then rain started to fall from between her lens

At first Alex thought that Lisa was wetting herself, and then, as the pile below her grew, he saw he was wrong.

It was worms. Hundreds. Thousands. Thin and clear, they poured from between Lisa's legs as she laughed. The worms writhed and began to spread across the floor.

Alex fired.

The bullet ripped through Lisa's breast and pushed her back against the door jamb. A flap of skin hung loose on her chest, and Alex thought that he could see her heart beating through frosted glass. The worms tumbled out through the flap and down her stomach.

A second bullet stopped Lisa's heart, and a third tore through her neck.

With a scream, Angus ran to his fallen wife.

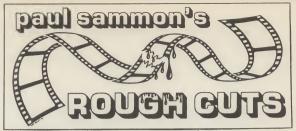
"No, no!" he cried, taking the deformed, bloody sack of a woman in his arms.

The worms wasted no time in squirming up Angus's pants legs, over his hands and arms. His screams of pain and anguish were intermixed as the creatures began to suck liquid from his body.

Alex could only stand and stare, frozen with grotesque curiosity, until he felt a prickling sensation against his feet.

The worms almost covered the floor. They had

Story continued on page 82.



You say you crave reviews, bubba?

Scintillating comments on videos? Laserdiscs? The bad and the beautiful?

Well, look no further. What follows are literally dazms of reviews, thumbnall sketches concerning some of the best (and trashiest) of 1993. A plethora of product, if you will. Plus a bit of grousing on what's personally proven to be a fairly shitty year.

But first . . .

During the weekend of October 8-10, 1993, it was my great pleasure to finally meet Tim Lucas. erstwhile editor of the essential Video Watchdog. Tim and I go way back, to the early Eighties and our days at Cinefantastique, but up until this year we'd only been voices on the telephone. What finally brought us together was the Los Angeles-based American Cinematheque's presentation of The Haunted Worlds of Mario Bava, a three-day festival dedicated to that much-missed Italian maestro of lowbudget, high-Gothic horror.

Tim had been flown in from the inclination in the incommentary on a number of uncut, pristine, 85mm Bava prints, which included such rarities as Lisa and the Devil and The Whip and the Body. And between these screenings Lucas and I hung out, gossiped or generally enjoyed ourselves. So thanks, Tim: I particularly liked that visit with David Del Valle.

Keep your eyes peeled for Lucas' upcoming Mario Bava: All the Colors of the Dark, Tim's longawaited Bava-book. This one's due for a 1994 release; it's sure to be a winner.

Now, on to the bitching.

Some of you already know that 1993 wasn't exactly my favorite year. Chronic pleural pneumonia, virtually no work, eight months in the hospital . . . you get the picture. But this pissing and moaning actually has a point, since it's a preamble for my blanket apology to those contributors who've had to wait a wearvingly long time to finalize their involvement with my soon-to-be-published anthologies The King is Dead: Tales of Elvis Postmortem/Splatterpunks 2. All I can say is that these matters are being addressed as speedily as possible. Though the situation is somewhat like an overcrowded Baskin-Robbins-take a number and wait-vou will be served.

Just as soon as I wade through everything I couldn't get to in June, July and August, that is

VIDEO REVIEWS

(Ratings involve the one to four star system [* - ****], four stars being best)

Psycho Candy

I'm constantly being asked where one can purchase the many Hong Kong films discussed in this column. One such (mail-order) place is:

Psycho Candy P.O. Box 835003 Richardson, TX 75083

Psycho Candy stocks many Chinese tapes at competitive prices (about \$20 - \$25 a pop). They also carry lists of current Hong Kong titles. Quality varies, but then again, it's a painful fact that Chinese distributors often bootleg their own vidoes (I), resulting in a bewildering variety of secondorthird-generation dubs. So if you're concerned about the look of a particular tape, ask first.

Anyhow, here's three betterthan-good Psycho Candy offerings:

Dragon Inn (1991 - Hong Kong)
*** Historical Drama Color Director: Raymond Lee With: Maggie
Cheung, Tony Leung, Brigitte Lin.

Historical action-epic set in the Ming Dynasty finds a small group of government loyalists bat-tling hordes of evil eunuchs when both sides are stranded in a desert inn during a raging dust storm. Alternately engrossing, romantic and hilarious; one amazing sequence has two women fighting each other using their clothes as weapons!

I Love Maria (aka Roboforce) (1988 - Hong Kong) *** Sci-Fi/Comedy Color D: Wong Che Keung With: Sally Yeh, Tsui Hark.

Two bumbling "heros" (including famed producer/director Tsui Hark, here in a rare leading role) actidently acquire a powerful female android (Sally Ych) who can only be controlled by the words "I love Curlyi" (?). A highoctane blend of action, comedy and science fiction, featuring a stunning star-turn by Yeh (she portrays both the sympathetic robot and the evil scientist who created her). One of the greats—an excellent introduction to Asian trash cinema.

Naked Killer (1992 - Hong Kong) **1/2 Thriller Color D: Clarence Fok Yiu Leung With: Ching My Lau. Simon Yam.

An emotionally scarred beauty is recruited by an older female assassin before then teaming up with a Hong Kong policeman, one investigating a deadyl elsbian hitwoman. Erotic, entertaining rip-off of Basic Institute is tons more fun than the overblown original.

Sinister Video

The godfather of public domain mail-order houses continues to supply us with obscure but superior product. Request a catalog from:

Sinister Cinema P.O. Box 4369 Medford OR 97501-0168

Latest titles include:

Horrors of Spider Island (1959 -Germany) ** 1/2 Sex - Horror B&W D: Fritz Bottger With: Alex D-Arcy, Barbara Valentin.

After a group of fleshy young dancers crashlands on a remote South Pacific island, their manager (Alex D'Arcy) is bitten by a radio-active spider and transforms into a furry-faced monster. More (soft core) sex than horror follows, with plenty of pneumatic breasts barely covered by late-Fifties lingerie.

This cheesy Eurotrash item was once considered a lost classic; now it reveals itself to be a languorous, minor item with a humid atmosphere of torpid carnality.

The Ray Dennis Steckler Collection

Sinister recently struck a deal with cult director Steckler (of The Incredibly strange creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed Up Zombies fame) to distribute many of Ray's most popular low-budget wonders. All feature beautiful transfers and colorful amoray boxes. Among the treasures are 1965's The Thrill Killers, an intense "held captive by psycho murderers" thriller that's probably Stecker's best picture, and the delirious Rat Pfink A-Boo-Boo, which midway (and surrealistically) switches from a straightforward kidnapping story into a threadbare superhero saga. For no damn good reason, either!

Something Weird Video

Those damned lads at Something Weird continue to helm one of the most distinctive video outlets on the planet. Their impressive, ever-expanding inventory of Harry Novak nudies, Mexican horror films and H.G. Lewis "classics" offers a truly bottomless source of scum-soaked delights. Such as:

Castle of Blood (1964 - Italian/French) *** Horror B&W D: Antonio Margheriti With: Barbara Steele, George Riviere.

This beautifully shot slice of pure ambience involves a 19th century journalist making a bet that he can survive a night in a haunted castle. Mood-drenched and dreamlike; a primo Italian Gothic that remains a sadly underrated classic. With genre icon Barbara Steele in one of her most mysterious roles.

Something Weird now offers an upgraded print of Castle of Blood. Since all previous versions were virtually unwatchable, this upgrade comes as great news. Finally—a decent print! Thanks, guys.

Diabolical Dr. Z, The (1966 - Spain/France) *** Horror B&W D: Jess Franco ("Henri Baum") With: Mabel Karr, Howard Vernon.

Polished semi-sequel to The Awful Dr. Orloff has a beautiful woman avenging the academic slights heaped upon her dead father (Dr. Z.) by transforming a voluptuous dancer into a robotic killer who murders with poisonous fingernails. Yeah, I know how that sounds, but this classy crap stands leagues apart from most Eurosleaze through its good acting, sooty cinematography and atmospheric jazz score. If cult darling Jess Franco had continued to make such stylish oddities as Dr. Z., I'd understand what all the fuss was about.

Shameless Plug: My novella "The Wedding Party" (to be featured in the early 1995 Peter Straub-edited anthology entitled Ghosts) contains a little homage to Dr. Z. Just thought you'd like to know....

The Coffin Joe Collection

Among the more important video achievements of 1993 was Something Weird's acquirement of four subtitled works by Brazilian actor/writer/director Jose Mojica Marins-better known as the longnailed, cape-wearing, top-hatted villain/philosopher, Coffin Joe. Marins' films come across like the bastard offspring of Mexican horror films and the Marquis De Sade; what's truly unsettling about these pathological shockers, however, is the sense that Marins fervently believes in his films' intensely nihilistic vision.

Two good Coffin Joe samplers are:

The Strange World of Coffin Joe (1968 - Brazil) *** Horror B&W
D: Jose Mojica Marins With: Jose Mojica Marins.

Uneven trilogy of short films begins with a Twilight Zoneish tale of a seemingly mildmannered dollmaker whose raw materials are anything but plastic. We then segue to a touching love story embracing foot fetishism, mental deviants and necrophilia. But it's the final episode that's the real stunner; Joe sets out to prove love is dead by kidnapping a married couple and submitting them to a hideous array of torture, starvation and S&M. Exceedingly weird. grim stuff, done by someone who obviously relishes it.

At Midnight I'll Take Your Soul Away (1963 - Brazil) *** Horror B&W D: Jose Mojica Marins With: Jose Mojica Marins.

Coffin Joe's first screen apger terrorizing a small town while searching for the woman who'll bear him a perfect son. Gory and still joiting, despite being made five years before Night of the Living Dead. Lots of snakes and spiders, too.

Frank Henenlotter's Sexy Shockers From The Vault

Bashet Case director (and trash film scholar) Frank Henenlotter has joined forces with Something Weird to unleash his personal pick of "17 favorite fright flicks that weren't meant for the kiddie matinee."

They aren't kidding; among the colorfully boxed, excellently transferred titles are such psychotronic items as The Curious Dr. Humpp, Monster at Camp Sunshine, and Satan in High Heels.

One particular standout is:

Ecco (1963 - Italy) ** 1/2 Mondo Documentary Color D; Gianni Proia Narration: George Sanders.

Released during the early Sixties "mondo" craze (an Italian word meaning "world"), this longthought-lost shockumentary revels in such bizarre sights as human pincushions, Japanese fertility rites and the quaint Laplander custom of letting women castrate reindeer with their teeth (a segment which temporarily put me off even the thought of oral sex). Narrated by an ennui-drenched George Sanders. who'd later kill himself because, as his suicide note explained, he was bored. Ecco's been nicely letterboxed (although the soundtrack slips out of synch) and may be ordered from:

Something Weird Video Dept. F.U.N., P.O. Box 33664 Seattle WA 98133 (206) 361-3759

Video Search of Miami

Tom Weisser's VSoM specializes in rare Asian/European titles, offering many Italian giallas and perverse Japanese "pink" films which have been subtitled for the first time. A catalog can be had from:

> Video Search of Miami P.O. Box 16-1917 Miami FL 33116 (305) 279-9773

Furthermore, VSoM is an excellent source of the many Hong Kong/Japanese films routinely covered here. Some of the best are:

The Baby Cart Collection

Video Searth has been systematically issuing some very nice subtitled versions of all six Lone Wolf and Cub films (better known in Japan as the "Sword of Vengcance" series). So here's your chance to see the full adventures of master swordsman Ito Ogami and his young so Daigoro, as they slice 'n dice their way through hordes of ninjas, warriors and scheming Feudal warlords. It's also a chance to compare the Japanese originals with Shogun Assassin, MCA's Americanized but still incredible Reader's Digest" version of this saga (which was formed by reediting and combining the first two Baby Cart Features).

Recommended Lone Wolf titles include Baby Cart 4: Heart of a Parent, Heart of a Child. This one gives plenty of kick-ass exposure to the gun-and-blade perambulator which gave this series its name.

Run and Kill (1993 - Hong Kong)
*** Psycho-Horror Color Directors:
Billy Tang With: Simon Yam,
Danny Lee, Cheng Tut Si.

Think you've seen it all, eh? Then pop in this over-the-top Asian sleazefest, which begins when a cuckolded husband drunkenly (and accidently) arranges for some vicious criminals to off his cheating wife. This sick thriller then moves way beyond Strangers on a Train territory as the by-nowhorrified hubbie refuses to pay for her murder only to find himself enmeshed in an ever-spiraling nightmare of ultraviolent retribution. It all comes to a sickening finale as grandmothers are tossed out of windows and little girls are roasted alive. My "favorite" scene has a bereaved father frantically running around with the charred corpse of his cherubic daughter after her crispy little head's been knocked off. Would make a great (a relative term, you understand) double-bill with Dr. Lamb, another pathological Simon Yam flick.

Death Line (1973 - England) (aka Raw Meat) *** Horror Color D: Gary Sherman. With: Donald Pleasence, Christopher Lee.

Like Castle of Blood before it, that I andmark English cannibal film was previously only available on headache-inducing 40th generation dubs. Not any more; VSoM has tracked down a watchable print of this tense, claustro-

phobic tale of a pathetic flesh-eater preying on the passengers of London's underground subway system. Poetic, political, and Poe-esque; an all-time fave. Makes me wonder why director Gary Sherman "graduated" to bigbudget crap like Pollergist.

Then again, who cares, we still have *Death Line*.

Mind the doors, please!

Urotsukidoji (aka The Wandering Kid) (1992 - Japan) *** Horror Color D: Hideki Takayama.

Why single out VSoM's version of this well-known Asian animated sex-and-horror fest, when stateside video distributor Anime 18 has released their own Englishdubbed (and far easier to find) version? Because Video Search offers the uncut saga, spread out over five tapes! Now you can revel in an apocalyptic battle between ordinary humans and supernatural beasts and freeze-frame the nasty bits, all at the same time! If anyone out there hasn't seen this thing yet, do-it's a real earthshaker. Sort of like a Japanese version of H.P. Lovecraft with a hardon.

Recommended Miscellaneous Tapes

Deranged (1974) *** Horror Color Directors: Alan Ormsby, Jeff Gillen. With: Roberts Blossom, Cosette Lee, Micki Moore (Moore Video)

Way back in 1974, when I first caught this close-to-the-bone Ed Gein biopic at a San Diego drive-in, I remember thinking (somewhere around my third beer) "Whoa-a sleeper!" Then this gloomy, alternately hilarious/frightening protoslasher pic promptly dropped out of sight, only to resurface in the mid-80's on a number of shittylooking bootlegs. Now the angels at Moore Video have put out a letterboxed, digitally-transferred, uncut version of Deranged, packaged with a (murky) documentary on the ole' Geinmeister himself.

Therefore, you are hereby ordered to immediately pick this pustulant puppy up, if only to savor Roberts Blossom's incredible lead performance.

The scene where a baffled Blossom inadvertently arouses a frumpy psychic is worth the price of the tape alone.

Devil Walks at Midnight, The (aka The Devil's Wedding Night) (1971-Italy/Belgium) ** 1/2 Horror Color Director: Jean Brismee With: Erika Blanc, Jean Servais (Intercontinental Home Video)

Above-average Eurotrash mixes Gothic horror with religious allegory as a busload of tourists representing the Seven Deadly Sins (greed, lust, gluttony etc.) are forced to spend the night in a creepy easile with a succubus. Better than you'd think. And cult star Erika Blane is really something; her strange, bony features can look seductive one moment and like a skull the next.

Horror Color D:

Colin Eggleston

With: John Har-

greaves, Briony

Bebets (Inter-

continental Home

ally unknown

"Nature Rebels"

film really piles

on the atmos-

phere after two

despicable yup-

pies take a vaca-

tion/hunting

trip on a remote

Aussie beach.

Before you can

say "The Birds!",

our heartless

duo are increas-

ingly hemmed

in by some pis-

This virtu-

Video)

sed-off local wildlife and a remarkably sinister sea-cow. Intriguing supernatural undercurrents abound in this begging-to-be-discovered obscurity.

Night Walker, The (1964) *** Crime-Horror B&W D: William Castle With: Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Taylor, Lloyd Bochner (MCA/Universal Home Video)

Tired of such overfamiliar William Castle fare as House On Haunted Hill and The Tingler? Then try this Robert Blochscripted tale of a wealthy widow (Barbara Stanwyck) tormented by increasingly weird nightmares after the death of her horribly scarred husband. A solid little shocker that boasts a surrealistically designed montage by Saul Bass and some creepy set pieces (love that mannequin wedding ceremonyl). There's a snazzy, surfmusic-like theme song, too.

PICK OF THE LITTER

Long Weekend (1977 - Australian) ** 1/2

"The alternative video source for adult horror films"

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With this installment Rough Cuts introduces "Pick of the Litter," a section solely devoted to those tapes which have somehow been overlooked or underrated. This issue's premiere discovery is:

Out of Order (1985 - Holland) *** Suspense Color Director: Carl Schenkel With: Rene Soutendijk, Gotz George (Vestron Video)

Stylish, offbeat Dutch suspenser has four disparate types trapped between floors in a balky elevator; before long, they're battling a dangerous situation and each other. Smart, low-key suspenser features intriguing characters imaginative touches and an increasingly urgent atmosphere. The downside is some hollow dubbing and a way-too-dark source print-half the time you can't see what's going on!

A BRIEF MAILBAG INTERLUDE

Would the reader who wrote me concerning his problems with obtaining A Chinese Ghost Story from Video Mania please write back to let me know if you ever got a copy?

If not, I may have a surprise for you

LASERDISCS

The Criterion Collection

Those laudable film preservationists at The Voyager Company keep chuming out remarkable, bonus-laden laserdises. Yes, they are expensive (around \$100.00 for topof-the-line titles). But after spending the last few months helping Voyager put together a special Roboop disc and seeing how much effort they put into it, I'm now more than happy to shell out the extra cash for most Voyager discs. Recent releases include: Akira (1987 - Japan) *** Science Fiction - Action Color Letterboxed (with supplements) D: Katsuhiro Otomo.

Somehow I was lucky enough to catch Akira during its initial run in a palatial Tokyo theater (where everyone smokes and you can buy either cold saki or beer at the refreshment counter). This Criterion edition most fully replicates that initial theatrical experience: the image quality (letterboxed, of course) is superb, there's both English and Japanese soundtraccks, and the lavish supplemental materials include pencil sketches, storyboards and a "Making of Akira" featurette. I'd tell you that Akira concerns secret government experiments on psychic Japanese children, leavened by a healthy amount of Blade Runner backgrounds and Mad Max action scenes, but you already know that.

If not, where the hell have you been the past few years?!?

Bram Stoker's Dracula (1992) ***
Horror Color Letterboxed (with supplements) D: Francis Ford Coppola With: Gary Oldman, Winnona Ryder, Anthony Hopkins.

Sure it's miscast. And wildly uneven. But this affectionate, meticulous throwback to those old studio-bound Universal/Hammer horror classics has so many good things going for it that Bram Stoker's Dracula has become the most replayed disc here at La Casa Pescado. The costume designs, the sets, Gary Oldman's majestic performance, the clever use of in-camera effects-hey, people, what more do you want? So stifle that fannish bickering, already; years from now this one's going to be hailed as the phantasmagoric fever-dream it really is.

In the meantime, you can study the Criterion disc's many supplemental chapters, which include sections on the film's lavish wardrobe design and *Dracula*'s prior cinematic influences (equally drawn from both Murnau's Nosferatu and Cocteau's Beauty and the Beast). This disc also scoops the film's dense, creative sound effects (which won an Academy Award) right out of the speakers and dumps them into your lap. Making this the rare case of a laserdisc sounding better than the theatrical print!

Killer, The (1989 - Hong Kong)
*** Crime-Thriller Color Letterboxed (with supplements) D: John
Woo With: Chow Yun Fat, Danny
Lee, Sally Yeh.

A sentimental, exhilarating gangster film, and probably the best-known Chinese genre picture. Both Chow Yun Fat and Danny Lee are superb as, respectively, the ethical hit man trying to retire and the policeman out to catch him. Sally Yeh (of I Love Maria fame) is also on hand as a blind night club singer, as are nonstop gunfights, lethal car chases and a staggering body count. Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah would have been proud; this is the best laserdisc presentation of any Hong Kong action film, helmed by that genre's best director.

Also included are a staggering seventeen trailers from earlier Woo efforts, beginning with such Golden Harvest kung-fu extravaganzas as Last Hurrah For Chivalty and leading all the way up to Hard Target, Woo's American film debut.

Man Who Fell To Earth, The (1976 - England/USA) *** 1/2 Science Fiction Color Letterboxed (with supplements) D:Nicholas Roeg With: David Bowie, Candy Clark, Buck Henry, Rip Torn.

Undoubtedly the greatest presentation yet of director Nick Roeg's exceptional sf/romance/satire/comedy/art film; full letterboxing, audio commentary by Roeg and star David Bowie, script extracts, 20 additional minutes of extra footage, etc. etc. etc.

The extra footage, in particular, makes Roeg's complex story of an alcoholic alien hoping to bring water to his moisture-starved planet that much more comprehensible. Although one previously deleted scene (Rip Torn rolling around nude, in bed, with a girl who grabs his naked penis to talk into it like a Shure microphone makes me understand why the American censors leaped for their scissors before this pic's initial stateside release.

More Recommended Discs

Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (1970) ** 1/2 Comedy-Drama-Satire Color Letterboxed D: Russ Meyer With: Dolly Read, Cynthia Meyers (Fox Home Video)

Yowl The movie Roger Ebert would rather forget! Follow the zany adventures of busty allgirl band 'The Carrie Nations' as they pinwheel their way through the free-lovin' Sixties, smokin', screwin' and dyin' along the way. Fox's disc features an excellent widescreen print, good mono sound, and the ever-impressive John Lazar as the flamboyant "Z-Man" Bartel—who, rumor has it, was so effective that his career was permanently stalled due to excessive typecasting.

Blade Runner: The Director's Cut (1982) *** 1/2 Science Fiction Color Letterboxed D: Ridley Scott With: Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young (Warner Home Video)

I'm assuming most of you have already read or at least heard of my Video Watchdog cover story (in issue #20) titled "Do Androids Dream of Unicorns?". If not, that's where I examine the seven (I) different versions of Ridley Scott's dystopian future noir.

So I won't beat a dead replicant here. Suffice it to say that this cut—shorn of Harrison Ford's awkward, bullying narration—forces a complete reevaluation of this landmark motion picture. Time to throw away all those other versions (well, alright—hang onto your Criterion disc); this is the definitive edition of a SF milestone.

Haunting, The (1963) *** 1/2 Horror B&W Letterboxed D: Robert Wise With: Julie Harris, Richard Johnson, Russ Tamblyn, Claire Bloom (MGM/UA Home Video)

A masterpiece of quiet horror and the last great "suggestive" ghost story; it's only fitting that this Lewtonesque classic was directed by a protege of Val Lewton, Robert Wise. Story concerns four psychic investigators gathered at the ill-reputed Hill House, who've come to seek its spirits. Highlights include a clutching hand that isn't there and a shock cut to a wild-eved woman, one that gave me nightmares for years. Beautifully letterboxed (and about time, tool). The original full-screen theatrical trailer is also included.

Legend of Hillbilly John, The (aka Who Fears The Devil and My Name Is John) (1973) ** Fantasy Color D: John Newland With: Hedge Capers, Severn Darden, Denver Pyle (Image Entertainment)

As a longtime fan of backwoods fantasist Manly Wade Wellman, I'd always been curious about this cinematic adaptation of Wellman's classic Silver John story "O Ugly Bird!" But I'd never seen it until I spotted this disc in a local bargain bin.

What a surprisel Here's an entertaining low-budgeter with an unusual Appalachian tang. You get four stories in one, too. Plot strands include a segment about singing to defy the Devil, a trip to a haunted mountaintop, a small town bedeviled by a redneck want lock and his pterodacty-like familiar, and a trip back in time to a cursed cotton plantation. While Hilbilily John might be a bit too laid

back (that early Seventies hippie thing) and saddled with a bland leading man (Hedge Capers, he of the fifteen minute folk music career), overall this is a sincere, off-beat effort that doesn't condescend to its subject matter audience. Director John Newland, who created and introduced One Step Beyond, dabs in a number of nice touches; one character's death is suggested by the image tearing in half and sprocketing off the screen.

Point Blank (1967) *** Crime Thriller Color Letterboxed D: John Boorman With: Lee Marvin, Angie Dickinson, John Vernon (MGM/UA Home Video)

John Boorman's ultra-stylish hallucinogenic crime thriller set new standards for action-adventure films. But this is also (and arguably) a subtle supernatural film, with Lee Marvin as a backfrom-the-dead avenger who literally disappears once his quest for stolen loot is fulfilled. Anyway, you should have this in your collection simply because it's one of the best American films of the Sixties. And the punch Marvin delivers to a gangster's crotch during a nightclub fistfight has to be one of the most unrepentently vicious moments in the annals of crime cinema. Disc includes both the theatrical trailer and a rare "Making Of" featurette.

It's a wrap.

Next time? Who knows.

Until then, my best wishes to everyone for a healthy and successful 1994.

And hey up there—if God or Buddha or whoever is reading this, I'm really getting a wee bit *tired* of living through this contemporary biblical epic you've cast me in.

Want a suggestion for 1994, O timeless gods and goddesses? Rewrite your script.

I'd rather star in a rags-toriches story, you know?



KATHRYN PTACEK

ANTHOLOGY ATTIC

Eclectic is the key for this column. There's lots of stuff this time around . . . even a review.

I still haven't caught up on my reading, but then, what's new. Right? It's a real good thing I really like to read short stories. I just haven't been reading many novels of late Right now the anthologies I'm collecting to read and review are gathering in stacks under my bed. It started as one stack, quickly became two, and now numbers four. Or was that five?

I haven't finished ready Confederacy of the Dead, as I'd hoped I would in time for this column. Maybe next time . . . or the time after that. And I just got the new Michele Slung anthology, Shudder Again, plus there are all these mystery/suspense anthologies

I would, however, like to mention some anthologies that are out there now in ReaderLand. I haven't reviewed them here, and probably won't, but thought you'd be interested in knowing about them.

100 Hair-Raising Little Horror Stories (Al Sarrantonio and Martin H. Creenberg, editors, Barnes & Noble Books, 496 pages, \$8.95, 1.56619-506-8) is a big volume and reminds me of those old English anthologies I used to love to read (I would still read them, if I had the time). As the title indicates, there are a hundred stories (there really are; I counted them; just in case) none much longer than 10 pages at the very most. A number of them are older stories by folks like Ambrose Bierce, Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe, E. F. Benson, etc., but a fair number are by more contemporary writers (Henry Slesar, Ramsey Campbell, Joe R. Lansdale, etc.). Women writers don't fare well in this volume—there are just ten stories by the ladies, leaving the remaining 90 to the guys. Sigh.



Mysterious Cat Stories (John Richard Stephens and Kim Smith, editors; Carroll & Craf; 303 pages; \$19.95; 0-88184-948-0). Cats and anthologies seem to be popular

these days, what with this volume and Capitol Cat Crimes (to be reviewed at a later date) and Cat Crimes I and Cat Crimes 2. Who knows—maybe there's a Felonious Felines anthology out there, or Cryptic Kitties; I wouldn't be surprised.

Cats, however, lend themselves well to mystery and suspense, which is the reason I suspect we're seeing so many of these now (I mean, where are the Horses of Horror or Riddles of the Reptiles anthologies? Cats have long been associated with writers, mostly I suspect because cats make good paperweights; mine sure do). This is a reprint volume, with stories by Robert Bloch, August Derleth, Washington Irving, Bram Stoker, etc.

Nursery Crimes (Stefan Dziemianowicz, Robert Weinberg and Martin H. Greenberg, editors; Barnes & Noble Books: 560 pages: \$??: 1-56619-101-7) is subtitled "30 Classic Tales of Horror" and as you might have gathered from the title concerns children and horror. Among the authors with stories: Richard Matheson, Theodore Sturgeon, Margaret St. Clair, Charles L. Grant, Steve Rasnic Tem and Melanie Tem, David Morrell. This might be on my list to read in the future.

If you've been following this column for some time, you know that I tend to grumble about reprints in anthologies. Sometimes, I feel, there are just too many—especially when there's a dearth of markets out there for the living writers (well, you know, dead writers demand no royalties) and all these fine stories that have never been in an anthology floating around.

Well, occasionally reprints are a good thing.

For instance, take The Mists From Beyond, 20 Ghost Stories & Tales From the Other Side (Robert Stefan Weinberg. Dziemianowicz, Martin H. Greenberg, editors; ROC; 350 pages; \$20; 0.451.45239-9). Sometimes when a volume contains reprints, you get a chance to read stories you might have otherwise missed-such as happened with me. I got to read Harlan Ellison's "Laugh Track." I'd never read it, never saw it in another anthology (which is not to say that it's not in one, just that I never saw it).

With volumes such as this one you can catch up on the various older stories of some of your favorite writers.

On the other hand, reprints can be over done rather easily. One writer I know has one particular story that has been tapped for nearly a dozen anthologies; he's glad to get the reprint fee and likes to see the story in print again, but would be just as glad to see any number of his other stories reprinted.

Market News:

The Terror on Summer Vacation anthology to have been edited by Alice Alfonsi at Zebra Books has been cancelled, since she is no longer with the company. The Paladin SF Group cancelled all of its anthologies as it is folding.

And I thought this might be

of interest to you (writers or readers):

Tales From Necropolis - Brainstorm Comics, 457 Main St., Suite 162, Farmingdale NY 11735. Editors: Amy and Kurt Wimberger. This is a new horror anthology "in comic book format. Each issue will have three to four stories, an interview with someone involved in the horror field-writer, artist, director, etc.-and reviews, space permitting. Necropolis is open to one and all, either in fiction or an interview. Please query re: interview subject and pay rates. A nine-page comic in script form is your best bet. Please query for longer stories. For samples of script format, send a 9x12 SASE with 52 cent stamp to me, Amy Wasp-Wimberger. Right now, payment is a percentage of profits, depending on page length. The better Necropolis does, the better we all do. We hope to move to a fixed per/page rate by mid-1994 when we go bimonthly. The lead time for comics is pretty long. Issues are solicited two months before they are sent to the printer and I must let the distributors know who the writers and artists are. Right now, I'm looking for stories for June 1994 and bevond."

And now on to the feature

Narrow Houses: Tales of Superstition, Suspense and Fear (Peter Crowther, editor; Little, Brown & Co., (UK); 460 pages; L15.99; 0-316-90395-7).

This anthology edited by Engishman Peter Crowther was a finalist for the recent World Fantasy Award; not bad, eh? It's also the first of a planned series, one that I'm really looking forward to. One of the things I particularly liked about this anthology was the higher-than-usual ratio of English writers to Americans. In the US we occasionally see a British name here and there, most likely Ramsey Campbell in one anthology or another. But rarely do we have half a dozen or more gathered together. This gives the reader a different view, not the same old American view of horror. It's one of the reasons I really liked Northem Fright, the Canadian anthology. The stories are just a little different, and that's good. Refreshing voices, as you will.

The premise, or theme, of Narrow Houses is superstitions. Narrow houses is another name for coffins. I liked the variety of superstitions—a number of them were those I'd actually heard of, while some were really way off the scale, and that mix is good. You wouldn't want a whole volume of black cat superstitions—not even for a suspense anthology.

My Usual Reminder: just because I don't mention something doesn't mean I didn't like it. Space is limited, after all.

Stephen Gallagher gives us "The Sluice," a chilling story of a mental institution and one of its inhabitant's possessions—Guatemalan worry dolls. Callagher is a strong writer; I like his books and stories, and wish we saw more of both in the US.

Nancy A. Collins evokes ohso-well the superstitions of New Orleans in "The Needle-Men," and shows the reader there's more than tourist attractions there with this wicked little tale.

The Scottish folktale of the selkie-basically, seals that turn into humans-forms the basis for Robert Holdstock's "The Silvering," It's a powerful, evocative story, and one I don't think you'll forget soon. In "A Prick of Thorn" Rex Miller offers up a story and characters just as far away from his Slob novels as you can imagine; I want to read more short fiction by this writer.

In "Glory" Nicholas Royle paints another unforgettable picture of a man who takes photographs and what happens one day with a little girl "The Tale of Peg and the Brain" by Ian Watson is a very English tale, a very arresting one as well.

"Naming Names" by Pat Cadigan is another strange story of the ultimate non-family family. "Stone Magic" by Andrew Vachss is very short, very much to the point, and very unforgettable.

Other contributors include Ray Bradbury, Darrell Schweitzer, Chet Williamson, Pauline E. Dungate, Ed Gorman, Rick Hautala, Stephen Laws, Kim Newman, Richard T. Chizmar, Ramsey Campbell, William F. Nolan, Brian Stableford, Steve Rasnic Tem, Nancy Holder, Peter James, Christopher Fowler, Jonathan Carroll, James Lovegrove, Ian McDonald, David B. Silva, J. N. Williamson.

Highly recommended.

On the personal front, I still have less and less time each month (where does the time go? Is there some sort of Time Vampire out there that sucks the free minutes from our lives?) to read and do all that other nifty stuff (such as

write). However, I did have some recent good news: I sold a story to the anthology Mysteries For Mother, I have no idea when it's scheduled. My suspense novel, The Hunted, is out in paperback from Diamond Berkley in January (or possibly February), so look for that and go out and buy several thousand copies apiece (please!). The royalties would be nice!

That's all for now. The next column will be on mystery and suspense anthologies. Maybe. In the meantime, keep reading.

Dominick Cancilla's story "WEIGHT" Continued from page 73

moved quickly, more quickly than Alex would have thought possible, and were now burrowing their way into his bare feet. Alex looked down to see half a dozen of them disappear into him through thin red tunnels.

Back in his apartment there was more alcohol and vinegar. He could burn and cauterize the wounds, perhaps kill the things before they lay their eggs or drink the fluid in his body.

Alex turned to run but his legs betrayed him. He fell to the floor and was immediately struck by a wave of parasites, tearing at his flesh, his face. The worms made quick work of the large man, and began to make their way down through cracks in the floor, hoping to find further nourishment on the floors below.



Katie slept soundly in her bed. The noise down the hall was muffled, and did not bother her. Even the pounding she heard earlier did nothing more than make her stir.

In her dreams, Katie played ball with Scraps in the park like they used to, before it was dangerous to be around other living things. They rolled around in the grass and ran among the trees, without a care in the world. But these simple pleasures had a sour taste to them; Katie knew that she would never see her dog again, and even in her dreams she cried.

Katie was filled with a sadness which threatened to consume her. As she slept, a thin tear creeped from the corner of her eye, dropped to the floor, and wriggled out of sight.

-CD

THE LEVEL OF THE FLAME

DAVID NIALL WILSON

DAVID NIALL WILSON is the editor of the Norfolk, Virginia-based quarterly, The Tome, and one of the field's most promising young writers. His moody short storics are starting to pop up everywhere in the horror/fantasy field-mass-market and specialtypress anthologies and numerous magazines.

The border is only ten miles away. Telephone pedsolur together with green mile markers and flashing billboards. The dashboard illuminates the tiny world within the old Buick, giving it the appearance of a space-ship control console from some "B" grade Sei-fi flick. Jose fancies that he can see the bones of his fingers silhouetted within the glowing skin of his hands.

Five miles. Fertile countryside fades mile by mile to dust. Buildings grow scarce. Only the wind disturbs the open desert beyond the road, the wind and the night spirits. Jose shivers, passing the thought from his mind. Tonight is no night for games in his head. He will need it to be clear. If all goes as planned, he may need it to survive.

Two miles. Eduardo lies twenty miles in the past. It seems like years of time and space separate them. That is fine. There is much to do, much to learn, before those miles can pass beneath him again, before he can return. If he is to teach Eduardo the lessons he has planned, he must first become the student. The moonlit landscape radiates solitude, closing him in with the weight of limitless space.

One mile. Ahead the lights of the crossing glimmer faintly. The warning beacons atop the bridge beckon like stationary fireflies. They seem to float in the air, suspended in the depths of a pool of darkness. Illusion. Road hypnosis. As the distance closes, the illusion fades. The bridge melts from the mist that rises from the river. An old man steps uncertainly from the shack beside the bridge. He wears a gun, but there is no courage in his step. He might as well be naked. Pulling to a stop, Jose smiles, flashing his driver's license.

A flashlight beam dances over the card, his face, and the seat. When it passes, echoed flash patterns steal Jose's sight for a moment. It reminds him of a kaleidoscope he once owned. The patterns fade to a weathered face, framed in bristling grey whiskers and topped by a grey cowboy hat.

"Kind of late crossin', ain't ya?" a voice rasps. It is a voice beset by time and cheap whiskey—a common voice. "Don't get much traffic this time a night."

Jose smiles again. "I have someone to see," he explains. "She keeps very odd hours, and it is a long drive."

"I see," the old one says, not seeing at all. "Well,

The border passes beneath him leaving no sign that it is there. Silence unfolds itself once more from the land about him, embracing the old car and emphasizing the steady roar of its engine. It sounds as loud as a jedliner in the vold. Pump, Jose thinks, Invernotice the sound in the city. In a herd of its kind, the Buick runs silent.

Like still visions passing through a slide projector, Manuel's instructions click through Jose's mind.

"Speak only when asked."

"Never meet her eyes."

"Do not laugh."

"Forget nothing . . . one lost word could cost you more than you are willing to pay."

Very strange words, spoken seriously. Jose had committed them to memory. Manuel was old. Manuel was maybe a little strange, perhaps even crazy, but he knew the power. The old power, not that of neon electronics or chemical chains that bound the soul. Power of the soul, power of the land.

Eduardo did not know that he had come here. Had he known, he would have laughed. Eduardo believed in a private trinity: the green of his cash, the burn of his white-powder personality, (always flowing through his veins), and the shining chrome of his gun. Eduardo was a fool.

Jose has not seen Carla in three days. His little sister has gone to Eduardo, gone for good. Carla is only sixteen, and without their father and their mother, there is only Jose. First it was a flashy smile. Next came flashy dothes. Then the Cocaine. Jose has warned her, screamed at her, but the drugs have dulled her wit. The shine fades from her eves. They are like.

mirrors in which his reflection wavers, and he must clear them before they are blank forever. He shakes loose these nagging worries, concentrating again on the road before him.

The darkness surrounds him possessively. Only the twin-eyed glare of the Buick's headlights marks the way. The moon has hidden behind a screen of low-hanging clouds. Is it frightened, he wonders? He is. Perhaps he is a fool, too, driving alone in an empty desert. Alone, that is, except for the night spirits—and for Juana. His earlier shiver returns and it will not be brushed aside. The miles,

so recently endless, grow rapidly too short.

What if she is not there? What if she chooses not to speak? What if—God forbid—he angers her? Too many questions, no answers. There is only the chill in his blood and the desert road.

His father told him tales. His grandfather had told him others. Jose had feared to ask them of their grandfathers—had feared their answers. It had been said, by some, that the name Juana had been passed down, that many had borne it. It was said by others that some were fools. Jose believed there were questions that led to madness. He did not ask them.

The mountain looms ahead, lending an even darker shade to a land already deep in shadow. There are no lights. Where is she? The deepest shadows seem to beckon. His eyes widen with fear, his heart keeps time with the Buick's wheels, which play an intricate rhythm on the crumbling, uneven pavement. He slows the car and stops.

Dark shapes coalesce as his eyes adjust. The reveal of the invading lights of his car have softened the darkness-frecing his vision. The natural feel of the moon's glow steadies his courage in contrast to the crowded, claustrophobic interior of the Buick. Leaving it behind, he moves toward the mountain. He sees nothing, but knows there is something here to see. A flicker of orange light draws his attention to a rocky outcropping. Tongues of flame speak fire-words to his eyes. He is certain there had not been such a light there when he stopped.

Grasping at the fraying strands of his courage, he moves toward the light. It is a glowing halo around a large stone. He cannot see the fire clearly, only the leaping talons of light and shadow formed of dancing winds among eclipsed embers. Is it really there?

Sparks leap to challenge the stars as he rounds the stone. A stick is poking the glowing coals. A huddled figure is seated directly across the fire from him. For

> a moment, indecision rules. Then, seeing no acknowledgment of his presence in the other's posture, receiving no nod or glance, he seats himself crosslegged on the ground to wait.

Speak only when asked.

The silence is weighted

The silence is weighted by anticipation; Jose controls a strong urge to clear his throat. Crickets chirp with unnerving volume. An owl hoots, long and mournful. The stick pokes once more into the fire's embers, and the sparks dance.

The figure's head rises slowly, shifting like the sands. The hood drops back, drifting

over bony shoulders now visible in the flickering light. Seamed skin wrinkles further with the mouth's opening. The eyes do not smile. He wonders briefly what color they are beyond the leaping firelight. Tonight they glow red.

"Why have you come?"

He must burn

vou . . . melt vou

to nothing. Then

will his soul be

yours. Then shall

he grow cold.

Granted to speak, Jose is silent. How to word it? "I seek justice," he says finally.

"You seek revenge," the voice corrects, almost patronizingly. Jose almost retorts—catches his silence and clenches it between gnashing teeth. The eyes alone live in a wrinkled ocean of age. Jose shifts his own gaze about nervously.

Never meet her eyes.

"Seeing is difficult through unfocused eyes." It is a statement. Jose does not answer. Neither does he meet her gaze.

The silence returns, but it is no longer a weight. It is supplanted by a scrutiny of deepest insight. Jose's fear flutters behind the tingling of her probe, ready to blossom to panie if she provokes it. A feeling of nakedness washes through him—of violation. Wondering what might happen if he slips, meeting those eyes, he shudders.

"This Eduardo is a strong man."

This comment brings derision to Jose's eyes. His lip quivers, on the verge of a sneer. He does not laugh.

Do not laugh.

"Are you stronger, then?" she asks. She knows the answer, but Jose speaks it.



"No, Maestra, but you are. That is why I am here." Silence again. Even the crickets do not speak. The owl has forgotten to voice its sorrow. Jose prepares to remember whatever she tells him.

One lost word could cost you more than you are willing to pay.

Hunger ebbs from the shadows. The fire seems to flare and close in. Her eyes bore through his forehead—but he still does not meet them. He feels forces undulating about his body, twining among the strands of his hair, fondling the extremities of his limbs ... testing. The meaning of Manuel's final instruction rises to the surface of his understanding. He feels ghost touches on the fringes of that which is more than he is willing to pay. This shudder is violent. Sweat coats his skin instantly, cold sweat, dampening his shirt and matting his hair.

"The power you seek surrounds you," she mutters, and he sees her gnomish form begin to sway with the flickering motion of the flames. "It is in and of you," she continues. He concentrates, memorizing, not yet looking for understanding, only for precision.

"Your enemy has power, but of another level. A lower level, the level of man. You seek the level of flame. You seek the fire, the burning, the cleansing. It must come from you, as well."

Rustling wings sound in the air above. The fire crackles. The crickets begin anew-louder and more discordant. Nature blocks his understanding. He fights, catching the final words in a strange, detached mental grope.

"He must burn you . . . melt you to nothing. Then will his soul be yours. Then shall he grow cold."

A fold opens in her tattered cloak. A withered hand, twin of that which still pokes the fire, snakes free. It holds a small wooden bowl. The hand moves the bowl toward his eyes, bringing its contents into focus. Green-dark like forest pine, clear. He knows now the color of her eyes. Don't stare, he tells himself.

Don't meet her eyes.

The bowl is like a third eye. Jose shifts his gaze, and she speaks a final word . . . a single command.

Domino revolations fall one upon another in slow-notion sensation. He feels himself rising, floating feels miles
run like water beneath him. The glow is that of the dashboard-he knows this-but the knowledge is separate from the
sensation. The bridge approaches-he stops. The old man,
face melling wrinkles to jaw, dripping suspicion, grows to
giant size in his vision. He screams meaningless sounds at
incredible, pounding volume. Jose mashes the pedal and
flies, spinning the decaying age-ridden apparition away,
launching forward to embrace the solitude of the road.
Multi-colored light washes across the skylime-dawn melting
to day. He remembers to look at the road, makes the
curve-barely. Numbness creeps out to greet his nerves.

Twenty miles end in bleak betrayal as his weak-willed mind collapses to black.

The Buick rests silently. Jose feels the parched skin of his lips burning as he forces them apart. His throat is so thick with bile and dried mucus that he can barely breathe. Sounds bombard him from all sides—day sounds—tity sounds. He gropes for purchase on the dash, the steering wheel, pulling himself upright as sparks of pain shoot through his brain. Walls surround him, brick and stone, crumbling, covered with painted names and curses from a thousand young souls—termants. Nobody is near; the walls form an alley. More fog slips from his mind. He knows this alley. He is near his home, and that is where he must go—quickly.

He leaves the Buick in the alley. It is daylight, and he is alone. Did any see him come in? Not likely. He is alive, whole, and alone. His head aches with a constant pressure. It wants to explode; prevented by stubborn bone and skin, it complains. He slips through shadows and enters an adjoining street. His movements are furtive. Though this street is attached to his home, it is not a part of it. The street is Eduardo's. Eduardo is the street. The street is filthy. and he does not like the feel of it beneath his feet. He fears its touch, as though some malign sentience might allow it to announce his trespassing to Eduardo, or to his friends. Eduardo calls many friend. Jose is not among them. Though he has never dared to speak out, he has seen Eduardo's eyes, watching him as the man's filthy hands explore his little sister, watching for a reason to kill-and smiling.

Somehow the key is in the lock, and nobody has seen him. Sweat trickles and swirls down the back of his collar, carving valleys in the dust of the desert, which still covers him. The sweat feels like molten ice. The door swings inward, then shuts behind him. It is dark, but little cooler inside than on the street. Jose flips on a light and goes to the bathroom. He sticks his head under the shower and turns on the cold water. He must awaken fully. He must remember.

One lost word could cost you more than you are willing to pay.

Memory is clusive. What is real? He cannot say, only what he feels. Ancient eyes blend with strange words—and with flames. He cannot focus the memory enough to see her face. He cannot recall the timbre of her voice. He recalls only her words, how can they serve him?

You seek the level of the flame. It must be of you, as well. He must melt you to nothing, then shall his soul be yours. Then shall he grow cold.

The words will not mesh, they are meaningless. He needs to talk with Manuel, to think. He knows he must not sleep until the instructions are carried out, but his body sags already with the effort of remaining alert. Carla depends on him. Her life depends on this night. Little Carla, sister and friend, helplessly ensnared in Eduardo's network of drugs and sex, so far gone she believes she wants to be there, though no flame shoots from her eyes—no spring encourages her steps. She is as one dead—another death on Eduardo's shoulders. Another debt to be paid.

Memory swings further back, an uncontrolled pendulum. His mother had also had tales of Juana, though she had crossed herself thrice each time the name was mentioned, shuddering. There were tales of women's days, of candles and chants, of weaving and cooking, brewing and singing. Power. The power of the flame. The power of Juana.

Candles.

His heart speeds. His mind knows the solution as though it had been obvious all along. He moves in a daze to the kitchen, eyes vacant as his mind travels other trails. Wax. Wooden bowl and metal pot. Scissors. A sharp knife, sharp like a razor. Tools. This night, he will burn. Eduardo will burn him. He will melt to nothing . . melt in the power of the flame.



Jose staggers from the altar, no strength in his limbs. Behind him the flames rise, steady and hot. The domed ceiling of the old church bounces shadows about its surface at the candles' bidding. There are many candles on the altar. There are white candles—burning to praise. There are red candles—burning to cleanse. There are blue candles—burning to heal. There is another candle.

This candle burns to cleanse. Dark, green like the ocean's depths, streaked with the brown of Jose's dried and caked blood, pitted with the clippings of foot and hand, entwined with the strands of his hair. It's smoke is less pure. It's odor is dark—maleficent. It is sculpted with the twin images of Jose and Eduardo, one per side, molded carefully with shaking hands. It is burning fast.

Tottering down darkening streets, Jose moves like a zombie, searching for the alley leading to Manuel. He must stay awake. He must remain aware. The flame is of him, in him, and it seeks him, as well. It hungers. It does not care upon whom it feasts... only Jose can direct it away. He is nearly beyond thought as he staggers through the doorway, nearly collapsing at Manuel's feet.

Jose watches feverishly as the older man reads the lines of his face, brushing a light hand over his brow and testing the currents of the air. He sees Manuel sludder. He helps Jose to shaky feet, leading him inside. In the center of the room, there is a fire. Where, Jose wonders for the hundredth time, does the smoke go? It is not important. He is falling asleep-failing. He...

Manuel acts quickly. He pulls from his cloak an old, thin dagger. Reaching out, he plunges it into Jose's arm, twisting it violently. Jose screams, backing away. Searing pain tears at his mind—pulls him from the abyss of darkness opening to swallow his existence into meaninglessness. There is sorrow in Manuel's eyes, but no apology. The knife rises again, and plunges, finding the flesh of Jose's thigh. He does not sleep. He must not sleep.

He must burn you to nothing . . . it must come from

Eduardo puts a firm hand around Carla's shoulder, running smooth, ringed fingers over the curve of her young breasts. His nose is buried in her hair, and he mumbles to her words she can barely understand through the narrotic haze of her thoughts. She feels him, she feels the drug. It is a wonderful sensation, and she learns against him, eyes blank.

Then he screams. He yanks back his head, pulls free his arms, and screams. His hands become claws, ripping at his arms. His eyes become burning slames, glowing and

sparking with each new convulsion.

Carla is confused, but she watches with hazy interest as he scuttles away from her on the couch, tumbling to the floor and writhing in obvious agony. He is screaming of burning. He is screaming of fire. There is no fire, but he is ripping the skin from his own body, splattering blood on the white of Carla's blouse. Reaching down absently, she takes a drop on her finger, bringing it to her lips and smiling.

Jose is flying—lost in pain—lost in vision—lost in flame. He sees Eduardo's face, hovering nearby, screaming. He feels the heat of Eduardo's breath, scalding him, cursing him, dying. He feels the flame surround him, carrying him toward a sky of crimson and orange. He feels the dagger plunge yet again, finding his other arm—tearing his flesh. He revels in the pain, drawing it about him, wearing it as a shield. He feels his blood pouring down his flesh, puddling on the floor, but he does not relinquish his control.

Eternities pass. He feels the snuff of candle flame, the final drip of wax to altar, dripping like new-drawn blood. He sees the puff of smoke rise-wearing Eduardo's eyes. He sees it swirl, twisting downward, sifting through the sands of a desert. He sees it drowned in a bowl of deepest green. He looks into the world behind him and finds Manuel's eyes. Jose smiles. Sleep is a deep lake. He plunges in. Manuel, seeing that it is ended, stays his knife. Jose awakens. Manuel does not meet his eyes.

Manuel will never meet his eyes.

- CD



THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

THE MOTHERS AND FATHERS ITALIAN ASSOCIATION

"You Know, I Don't Drink, But... Do You Have Captain Blue Beard's Yuppie Grog?"

Before we divine the meaning of the title of today's essay, I thought I should share a few recent communications with all of you. [Letters, cards, photos, and checks can be sent to P.O. Box 146 Brook-landville MD 21022]. It's been a kind of MAFIA tradition to run a few letters now and then, so here goes:

Your last column ("The Little Boy Who Believed His Publisher Sorta-Kinda-Some," CD, Fall, 1993) was so dead-on it was scary. I think I'm with the same publisher and they should be sued for gross misrepresentation.

-Name Withheld Because The Writer Has No Balls

At the Fames '93, I picked up four back issues of CD, and because you want feedback so bad, I thought I'd contribute... Can't help you with the comic book you mentioned... Caltiki the Immortad Monster is responsible for the wallowing that embarrasses my family so much. Thanks for the great entertainment!

-Susan Alberti Falls Church, VA

Just finished your column about the

Little Boy, and I had to call and tell you how nice you nailed it. I know exactly what you're talkin' about here, and it's time we got off the chittlin circuit, buddy.

-Joe Lansdale (okay, so it was a phone call, not a letter)

I also received an invitation to join something called EOE, the Enemies of Ellison, which I have divined from the jungle telegraph to be the creation of Charles Platt. I'm not going to dignify the onesheet by quoting or reproducing it, but you should know it's a meanspirited rag, and clearly indicative of a mind with far too much free time available. Harlan is one of those guys whom people either admire greatly or they simply can't stand. Even though he's caused me plenty of trouble (like I've caused him over the years), I happen to love the guy. Harlan's not the easiest guy to get along with, and when he's in a good mood, he will admit it freely. But even if Platt thinks he has a legitimate reason to despise the man, this sort of public spectacle is ugly, self-demeaning, and ultimately self-defeating. Charles, please, take a hike.

And now, one more follow-up to a previous column.

Those of you who've been with us for awhile will remember my column about The Comic That Changed My Life and how I finally discovered the name (Unseen #15) and the year of it's appearance (1954). What happened next is one of those stories that makes you want to re-affirm your belief in the basic goodness that drives the human spirit. I got a manila mailer one day a while back containing an almost mint copy of Unseen #15, complete with its own plastic protector. I was touched. One of my readers thought enough to send me a comic that is forty years old.

But wait. There's more!

The guy who sent it was none other than Jeff Gelb, who has edited the three Hot Blood anthologies and a couple of others. I was truly stunned because I had been what you might call a turd to Jeff (we had a misunderstanding about a story I'd sent him for one of his anthologies, and I wrote him one fm yp agented hotherach dishpace wish you.

didn't-mail-it letters; like I'd written to my exagent). Over time, Harlan had attempted to patch things up between us, and I had participated but figured Jeff was just going through the motions, and that he (justifiably) thought I was an unrelieved asshole, no matter what Harlan said about me...

And then the comic comes in the mail and I no longer merely feel like a shit; no, I am content in the knowledge that I have finally, zenlike, become one with the essence of excrement. I call Jeff Gelb, thank him profusely, and ask him what I can do to show my gratitude.

Write me a story for Facing the Fear (his latest anthology), he says. What a right guy this Gelb is! He still wants to buy a story from me after I've been such an embarrassing mook. He loved the piece I eventually sent him, but the real point of all this is that Jeff Gelb is not like me—he's one of the real good guys.

Which brings us (I know, I know, I digressed a little . . . but don't I always? And isn't that part of my charm?) to the subject for today's discussion.

The place: Minneapolis; the time: Halloween weekend '93; the occasion: The World Fantasy Convention.

Since I was looking for a new publisher (see last issue's column for details), I had wrangled some lunches and dinners with some prospective new editors. This is a tradition at the WFC, and every writer wants to cadge as many freebinskies at a convention as possible. So here's what happened:

Elizabeth and I meet with an editor of a major publishing house whom I will Call "Jack" for the purposes of this adventure. Jack and I have known each other a long time. Although I've never worked with him, I've always heard good things

about him and I have admired his intelligence, wit, and style. In other words, Jack is a rarity among editors. As we leave the hotel to get into a cab. I notice that we are joined by another couple I don't recognize, but I seem to remember Jack saying that before I'd rousted him up for a dinner, he had already agreed to take out others. That he had agreed to let me horn in on his previous plans should tell you what a gentleman this guy is (Or how desirable I am as a possible writer for his publishing house? Or maybe what a ballsy mook I can be? I don't know, you decide . . .)

Anyway, as we all climb into the cab, Jack gets in the front seat with this guy who looks like he should be selling vacuum cleaners or encyclopedias. He has a neatly trimmed little mustache, short hair, and a smile that makes him look what the carnies used to call a rube. Elizabeth and I are joined by a thin angular woman wearing a trenchcoat cinched up so tightly, she looks like a wasp in a khaki shirt. Her face gives new meaning to the word "pointy." In fact, her features all conspire to make her look like the business end of a hatchet. In addition, she displays an expression that is equal parts irritation, paranoia, and constipation. As she sits down next to me I notice that while she has a purse dangling from her shoulder, she also clucthes a carry-on bag to her

Making light conversation, I say hello and (in an attempt to be humorous) comment that it looks like she's carrying her laptop with her and that I didn't know we were going to have a working dinner.

Ms. Hatchet Face does not smile, much less chuckle, but looks beadily at Elizabeth and I and says with as much severity as possible: "Insurance companies refuse to cover a computer if you leave it in your room!"

"You betcha!" chimes in the vacuum cleaner salesman in the front seat. "Wanda carries her Toshiba with her everywhere she

At this point, as the cab is checkerboarding its way through downtown traffic, Editor Jack introduces everyone. I am so stunned by the initial weirdness of these two. I have to confess I wasn't really paying much attention. I missed the guy's name completely, and vaguely recognized Wanda's last name as maybe that of a liasonpartner of an old buddy of mine. Anyway, we drive the rest of the way encased in this shell of awkward silence. Elizabeth and I exchange a few knowing glances which establish our mutual awareness of a possibly odd evening to follow.

Friends, I hope I can impress upon you how totally prescient we had been at that moment? And why does "possibly odd" not even begin to describe the dinner which followed?

Please, let me make the at-

Finally, we arrive at an ultraposh Italian-Continental restaurant. As we are getting out of the
cab, I notice that Vacuum Cleaner
Salesman is carrying a huge artist's
portfolio. (For those of you who
do not know what this is, simply
imagine a courier's pouch expanded to large proportions—at
least 3' x 2 1/2', maybe bigger, I
don't know. Suffice it to say, it's
bir.)

The ristorante is a beautiful second and I am not surprised that Editor Jack knows of such a placehe's that kind of guy. And so, we are escorted to our seats and as we settle in around the circular table, I notice that while Wanda store her laptop under her chair, her buddy is wrestling with his portfolio, finally wedging it between a potted ficus benjamina and the wall to his right. Our waiter materializes and inquires if we would like any cocktails and after the ladies, Jack, and I express our prefedes.

erences, it is Wanda's buddy's turn.

He looks up at the waiter with a toothy smile and says in a voice ittlet too loud, "You know, I don't drink ... but do you have Captain BlueBeard's Yuppie Grog!?" (This is obviously not the name of the liquor, but I am making am—admittedly weak—attempt to protect the guilty here).

The waiter looks at him with disdain and says softly, "No sir, I'm sorry. We only carry Long John's and Sneaky Pete's."

At this point, our guy leans back in his chair and begins to speak very loudly again: "Well, gosh, that's too bad, because I... well, goshl . . . you know, I PAINTED THE LABEL FOR CAP-TAIN BLUEBEARD'SI"

Before anyone can react, he whirls in his seat and grabs his portfolio and attempts to spread it out across the table. He does this with all the aplomb of a carpenter slapping a sheet of plywood across a couple of sawhorses. The waiter and lack and Elizabeth and I watch in utter amazement as he starts pulling out huge drawings and paintings of pirates in a variety of clichéd poses, full of all that silky Hollywood costumery. That he has not destroyed the elegantly-set table is one of the great unsolved mysteries. I hear glasses tinkling and silverware clinking as he further invades the place settings with his portfolio. Meanwhile, pictures of pirates are flying around EVE-RYWHERE.

"I really like pirates," says our good old artist buddy.

The waiter, meanwhile, is caught up a little short. "Ah, yes sir, but is there anything I can bring you to drink, sir?"

As he orders a coke, I lean over to Jack and quietly admit I'd missed this guy's name. Jack whispers back: "Oh, that's Dick Marvil, the artist."

Dick Marvil. The name is very familiar. I have seen his paintings

at countless conventions and he has done the covers for many high fantasy novels. He is a very good artist, and has won many awards. While I can appreciate his talent, I find his style and overall look to be part of a large phylum of genre/category pubishing art wherein everybody tries to re-invent Michael Whelan. It is art that is slavishly realistic, lushly colored (need to get readers' attention on those covers, you know), and devoid of any real originality or attempt at a personal style. It is art that is intentionally antiseptic and to me, at least, ultimately sterile and uninspiring.

So this yip-yop is Dick Marvil
...? Incredible, I think.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth is geting treated to a stack of prints of pirates on boats, of pirates hanging from masts, of pirates brandishing their swords, and of pirates ... well being pirates. Every once in a while Wanda chimes in with a comment about how much Dick really likes pirates.

The waiter brings the drinks, and I dash down my Jack Daniels as quickly as possible and order another. I've a feeling this is going to be a very long dinner...

As we move through the appetizers and the entrees, it becomes evident that Elizabeth and I will not be contributing much to the conversation. And any hope of talking to Jack about the direction of my next few novels is pure folly. Dick and Wanda, you see, have plenty to talk about: Dick and Wanda.

Wanda, once she gets a glass or two of wine in her, begins to yammer as incessantly as her husband. We are treated to long and boring litanies of their many vacations (the only thing missing from these are the slide shows), highly detailed descriptions of how each of them practice their particular arts, and endless observations and anecdotes that invariably begin with the phrase: "You know, that reminds me of the time Wanda

and I ... "

What was supposed to have been a quiet dinner among professionals became transformed into the Dick and Wanda Show. Wanda, as it turned out, is not only an author (she writes those cookiecutter high fantasies about pseudo-Celtic and Welsh superwomen with titles like The Quest for the Magic Harp of Thymac Issel, and well, you know what I'm talking about . . .), but also an artist. We are treated to samples of her work and even the latest production board of her latest cover, which she has illustrated herself and how many writers do you know who can do that? and by the way did we tell you what a wonderful skier she is and just for your information, she absolutely loves horses and we have this great stable at the end of our property and ...

Yeah, it went on like this for flucking hours. Every time Jack or Elizabeth or I would attempt to comment on something, or perhaps (the impiety of usl) to omtribute to the conversation, we would be instantly trampled under a new barrage of hollow verbiage about themselves. In between bites of weal or pasta, it was Dick this and Wanda that. Without stop! Endlessiv!

At one point, Elizabeth whispered to me (although it wasn't necessary—Dick and Wanda would have never noticed anything she might have wanted to say in a normal speaking voice), that it wasn't so bad after all: before we left the hotel she'd observed that the convention had been so hectic, a quiet dinner alone with me would have been nice, and here she was, getting her wish anyway.

It got to the point where Editor Jack was clearly embarrassed, but had no way of rectifying the situation. I felt sorry for him, and I admired the way he handled things as gentlemanly as possible. Me? I was ready to start throwing things. If there was a grapefruit handy, here was a woman who clearly needed to be Cagney-ed.

During a lull in the celebration of self-praise, Dick Marvil leaned over and in what he imagined to be a witty aside, whispered to Elizabeth: "This is what it's like when you go to dinner with a bunch of artista! Hehl! Hehl"

She chuckled in an attempt to maintain a sense of decorum, then turned my way to add: "I've been to dinner with plenty of artists, and it's NEVER like this!"

C'est orai, ma cherie. C'est orai, By the time the dessert cart was rolling past our table, things had transcended the merely agonizing, reaching those lofty, surreal heights where even the most tragic of events assume the cerie mantle of the humorous. The entire dinner was like watching a Fellin film in which you start thinking; things simply cannot be at they seem. All this shit I've endured has got to mean something else! Doesn't it?

But sadly it does not.

As dessert was being served, Wanda must have (finally) enquired of Editor Jack just exactly who were these people sitting across the table from them, because I heard Jack tell her that Elizabeth and I ran Borderlands Press and that I had recently won a Stoker Award in the novel category.

The look on her chiseled little face was sculpted of shock and puzdement. It must have been a very
confusing moment when she had
tog rapple with the idea that perhaps we had some legitlmate reason for accompanying an editor to
dinner. I mean, who the fuck did
these two num-heads think
were—a couple of their fans?

And don't get me wrong, I'm not carping about not being recognized or treated like a WRITER, or any of that bullshit. When I am among professionals, I expect just the opposite, actually, just a warm, commeraderie. I could give a flying shit whether or not everybody knows who I am, especially the likes of a couple of conceited pinheads like these two. You see, Elizabeth and I can talk. We would never be accused of being "quiet people," but we were both bludgeoned into silence by two of the most egocentric, distinctly uncharming, egregious boors I have ever met. I have never sat through such a festival of self-serving bullshit in my life. The experience was

so extraordinary in its sheer totality of relentless disregard for others I just had to share it with you. There was a kind of Dante-eque quality to the whole thing. I kept thinking that if there is a specific circle in hell for writers who chivvied one free dinner more than they deserved, then maybe I'd been given a glimpse of such a place.

You see, it's damned hard to be creative, and I am always willing to forgive creative people for being a bit out of skew with the rest of the planet because, by definitiion, you have to be if you want to be an artist of any kind. But (and here's the moral of your Padrone's story), being an artist is no excuse to be so without any whit of social grace, manners, or respect for others. It's okay if you tell jokes like a Catskills reject; it's okay if your face looks like a training ground for Mount Vesuvius; it's okay if fashion to you means making something with your hands and you happen to like polyester; it's okay if-well you get the idea . .

What's definitely not okay is to be like Dick and Wanda

That's it. I'm calling a cab.





CD REVIEWS

BOOKS, VIDEOS, SOFTWARE...

Young Blood, edited by Mike Baker, New York: Zebra, Mar. 1994, 349 pp., \$4.50.

The idea behind Young Blood is very simple: at some point in their careers, all of horror's most respected writers were young unknowns who nevertheless showed enough promise to get the publishing break they needed. To that end, Mike Baker has assembled thirty stories by writers under the age of thirty who represent, in his words, "the genre's lesser-known talent."

The good news is that a number of these writers deserve to be better known. Working within the confines of only a few thousand words, several have crafted tales that would shine in any of the "good-old-boy" anthologies Young Blood is partly a response to.

By and large, the handful of stories with unambiguous supernatural premises are the least engaging, the exception being Clark Perry's "Little Black Bags," which sustains a surprising amount of mystery even though its monster is onstage for better than half the story. It's hard to tell whether the preponderance of non-supernatural stories reflects Baker's own predilections, or whether themes such as the dysfunctional family, psychia trauma, and fatal obsession have become the younger generation's substitutes for the vampires, ghosts, and werewolves of old. In any event, a lot of the selections seem descended from the Shadows school of writing, which put a premium on the psychologically dislocating power of angst and alienation. In "Something More." Gordon Van Gelder takes us into the confidence of an unreliable narrator whose psychological motivation becomes disturbingly clear only at the climax. In contrast, the full-blown psychoses of the pointof-view characters in Pamela Briggs' "Hysterical," Barb Hendee's "Bringing Home a Stranger," lak Koke and Ionathan Bond's "Pieces of Prison," Christopher Hall's "Paper Animals," M. Francis Hamill's prose poem "Judas Window," Marc Paoletti's "Depths," and Tim Waggoner's "Mr. Punch" (which is all the more discomfitting for the surreal mood created by its sing-song narrative) blur the boundary between the real and the supernatural. In three stories-Terry Campbell's "Armadillo Village," Andrew Lynch's "Crawlspace," and Brain Everson's "Hebe Kills Jerry"-the leavening of horror with humor achieves a bizarreness that suits the plots.

My one complaint about Young Blood is that its first third is given over to classic reprints by Edgar Allan Poe, Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, Ramsey Campbell, and Stephen King, all written before their authors turned thirty. Though I understand the reasoning for this decision, I question its wisdom. It may well be that one or more contemporary writers in this volume is destined to become horror's next household name, but four of these five authors were already seasoned pros by the time their stories were published. This creates formidable expectations for the newer writers, most of whom have published (if even) only in the small press.

But if the imprimatur of superstar names convinces more people to pick up a copy of this book, then I protest too much. Young Blood is an admirable experiment that deserves reader support. Without it, the lesser-known talent of today may never develop into the better-known talent of tomorrow.

-Stefan Dziemianowicz

The Long Lost, by Ramsey Campbell, London: Headline, 1993, 375 pp., L16.99 hc.

Two-thirds of the way through Ramsey Campbell's thirteenth novel, Sarah Monk pauses to reflect on her attitude toward life: "She'd fallen into the habit of believing in God because there seemed to be nothing else to believe in, but perhaps she also needed to believe in herself, and now she did." Although easily forgotten, this line can be read as a commentary not only on the plot of The Long Lost, but on much of Campbell's fiction for the last decade.

Since his 1985 novel, Obsession, Campbell's work has been dominated by two types of character: those who displace responsibility for the turns their lives take onto forces they are powerless to control, and those who skeptically refuse to accept anything but a rational explanation for their seemingly supernatural run of bad luck. Although the disturbing ambiguity of his horrors derive largely from his refusal to resolve stories in favor of either of these irreconcilable viewpoints, it's clear that Campbell's sympathies lie with those characters who view their misfortunes realistically as temporary setbacks that they can overcome. For this reason, the horrors of The Long Lost seem reinforced with an added layer of conviction. Campbell has filled the novel with characters like Sarah Monk, who believe in themselves, yet suddenly find this faith an inadequate defense against what life hands them.

Although told from the viewpoint of several characters living in the quiet town of Chester, The Long Lost is primarily the story of David and Joelle Owain, who meet the elderly Gwendolyn during a portent-filled encounter on an island off the coast of Wales. Upon discovering that Gwendolyn is a distant relative of David's they bring her back to live in Chester. At first. it's easy to attribute Gwendolyn's cryptic behavior to the eccentricities of old age. But soon after some of the Owains' friends eat a special food she prepares for a party, their lives begin to fall apart. Lust, infidelity, greed, and other sins begin to surface among the townsfolk, leading to physically and emotionally brutal confrontations that destroy longstanding relationships.

Avoiding the apocalyptic hysterics that drove the similar scenario of Stephen King's Needful Things, Campbell keeps his story closely focused on the devastating personal impact of the novel's events. The result is some of his most intimate and affecting writing. Two scenes stand out in particular for their emotional potency: a sterile woman who wants children discovering that her best friend has aborted a child conceived with her unfaithful husband, and a financially destitute man waking up after he has administered lethal doses of drugs to himself and his family in a botched suicide/murder attempt.

It's a testament to the power of these and other scenes that the possible supernatural machinations Campbell ultimately intimates are not entirely persuasive. Yet I suspect that this is not completely unintended. The Long Lost is yet one more effort on his part to show that there may be as much to fear in the way we treat each other as in the way we fear others will treat us.

- Stefan Dziemianowicz

Disclosure, by Michael Crichton, Alfred A. Knopf Books, \$24.00 (ISBN 0-679-41945-4)

At this point, anyone who havit read a Crichton book, or seen one of the movies based on his two most recent novels, has probably been living in a cave for the past twenty years, meditating on the meaning of life.

Crichton has developed an uncanny knack for recognizing currently hot topics, then using them to create phenomenally successful novels: Jurassic Park-dinosaurs, Rising Sun-fear of Japan, and now with Disclosure-sexual harassment

Tom Sanders is an up-andcoming executive with the Digi-Com Corporation in Seattle. When the company announces an internal restructuring, everyone (including Sanders) assumes that he will be named as section head of the technical divisions. But in a shocking display of company politics, a woman from the home office is given the position. Making the situation even more delicate is the fact that Sanders and Meredith Johnson, his new boss, are former lovers.

Sanders considers quitting, but a corporate merger is in the works that would make his stock holdings worth millions. He finally resolves to make the best of a touchy situation and remain with DigiCom at least until the merger is completed:

On her first day, Meredith schedules meetings with the various division heads, asking Sanders to come to her office in the late afternoon. When he arrives, Meredith is warm and charming, suggesting that they have a glass of wine to commemorate "the good old days" when they were together. Wasting little time, Meredith begins to seduce Sanders, seeing their new working relationship as a perfect opportunity to enjoy a sexual affair.

Sanders protests, but quickly gets caught up in the heat of the moment. However, just as things are reaching the-point-of-no-return, Sanders has a change of heart, and breaks off the encounters.

The very next day, Meredith begins a devious campaign to make Sanders appear negligent and incompetent. When Sanders realizes that not only his career, but also his marriage and reputation are at stake, he decides to file sexual harassment charges against Meredith.

The novel then becomes a brilliant examination of the legal, ethical, and emotional aspects of sexual harassment. Crichton even makes a coherent attempt to clarify the sometimes murky distinction between a friendly after-work drink with a coworker, and an unwelcome sexual overture.

Of course, no Crichton novel would be complete without a touch of dazzling high-tech wizardry; in Disclosure, the DigiCom company is developing a virtual-reality database system that would give users the illusion of walking down numerous corridors of information accompanied by a floating "angel" who would help them find whichever files they needed.

Disclosure is taut, engrossing, and suspenseful in a very personal way. Although most of us will never find ourselves fighting vamires, or battling a sinister global conspiracy, any one of us—at any time—might be unwillingly dragged into a civil suit that could literally put everything at risk.

And in case you haven't already heard, Michael Douglas has been cast to star in the movie version.

-Roman A. Ranieri

The Diary of Jack the Ripper, narrative by Shirley Harrison, Hyperion Books, \$21.95 (ISBN 1-56282-704-9)

The identity of Jack the Ripper, history's most notorious serial killer, has been the subject of morbid speculation since his killing spree began over one hundred years ago. Dozens of books, both fiction and non-fiction, have presented solutions ranging from the plausible to the ridiculous.

Supposedly, in 1990, Mike Barrett, a life-long resident of Livcrpool, England, was given a package containing the diary of a man named James Maybrick, a successful cotton merchant who died in 1889. Upon reading this diary, Barrett uncovered the answer to the hundred-year-old mystery; Maybrick had been the infamous Jack the Ripper.

Is this diary genuine, or a hoax? This version of the book, published by Hyperion, does an admirable job of presenting both opposing points of view. It should also be noted that Hyperion published the diary after the original American publisher declared the manuscript a hoax and canceled the deal.

Whether real, or a forgery, the diary is a fascinating account of a Victorian era psychopath. If James Maybrick was Jack the Ripper, then we have one of the greatest examples of poetic irony in history, since his 26-year-old wife, Florie, was eventually tried and convicted of murdering him for money.

All things considered, I enjoyed the book and recommend it, but I remained firmly unconvinced about the diary's authenticity. In an Afterword to this American edition, Robert Smith, the British publisher, presents his reasons for believing the diary to be genuine. I found it amusing that one of the most vital points that Smith offers to prove the diary's authenticity, actually convinced me that it was a fake.

Smith explains that the diary contains particularly detailed descriptions of the murder scenes which were never published and appear only in the officially "closed" coroner's inquest records. He then goes on to say that these inquest records disappeared in 1888 and were missing until they were anonymously returned to Scotland Yard in 1987. Therefore, it was impossible for anyone to have this information prior to the mid-1980's.

Well, excuse me, Mr. Smith, but isn't it possible that literally hundreds of people might have read these records during the 99 years that they were missing? And isn't it also possible that one of these numerous readers just may have decided that it might be fun to use this information to concoct a Jack the Ripper diary?

If nothing else, you and your firends can enjoy hours of fascinating debate over whether *The Diary of Jack the Ripper* is actually genuine. And after all, isn't a book supposed to stimulate our sometimes dormant mental processes?

-Roman A. Ranieri

Animals, by John Skipp and Craig Spector, Bantam, November 1993, 449 pp., \$5.99, pb, ISBN 0-553-29924-7

Animals, the latest novel from Skipp & Spector, tells the story of Syd Jarrett, a thirtysomething bluecollar kind of guy living in a dying Pennsylvania industrial town who has recently undergone more than his share of life's bummer experiences, including a painful divorce. One morning while driving to work. Svd hits a deer when it bolts out in front of his car in an effort to escape something which is chasing it. When Syd gets out to investigate the damage, the deer is gone, and there's no sign of the other creature either. Thinking that maybe he can put the wounded animal out of its misery, Syd follows a trail of blood into the forest which lines the road. He comes across the deer soon enough, as well as the massive wolf which is feeding on it. Human and wolf stare at each other. Then the wolf is gone, dragging its meal with it. Syd returns to his car, wondering what it was he just encountered.

Soon thereafter Syd meets Nora, a woman unlike any he's ever met before. Through Nora, Syd finds new meaning to his life. She introduces him to a new, wilder way of living, one in which Syd gets closer to the animal within him. Syd soon learns to take charge of situations, to not let others bring him down, to stand up for himself.

And when the time is right, Nora infuses Syd with the potential to become the ultimate animal: a werewolf like she is.

All good things (especially relationships which burn white-hot at the inception) must come to an end, usually sooner than later. Which is what happens with Syd and Nora. She's just begun to help Syd adjust to the changes he's going through, when into their lives walks Vic, Nora's old boyfriend. Vic is not what you'd call a nice person, and he's a tad bit jealous as well

And that's where the real fun begins.

Animals explores ground rarely tread in horror novels, that being relationships, how we deal with them and how they affect our lives. This isn't a book about hip, cool werewolves roaming the country killing and chowing down on humans, it's about people and how their lives interact. The characters in Animals are so well-defined that you simply have to know more about them, even if they are lowlife scum like Vic, or Vaughn Restal, the yuppie slime who led Syd's ex-wife astray, or Marc Pankowski. the psychic scavenger (a great character if there ever was one).

Oddly-enough, though, Animals isn't a character-driven book. There's a highly-interesting, and involved, plot to it as well, one which is directly linked to the characterization. Some books are able to survive on characterization alone, others solely on audacious plotting. Animals isn't like that; the two elements are intertwined to such a degree that the removal of one would subsequently destroy the other. In other words, a lot of work went into this book, since this kind of unity doesn't occur by accident.

There's been a lot of talk lately about the rumored breakup of Skipp & Spector. Well it isn't a rumor, it's fact. After ten very successful years of working together, Skipp and Spector have decided to call it quits and go their separate ways. Animals is the final Skipp & Spector novel, the capstone on an impressive career. Highly recommended.

-Mike Baker

See How She Runs, by Matthew J. Costello, Berkley, February 1994, 327 pp., pb. ISBN 0-425-14096-2

Most of Matthew Costello's previous novels had some sort of supernatural element to them. With his last novel, Homecoming, Costello branched out in a different direction, moving more toward the suspense/thriller field. With See How She Runs, Costello continues to make inroads into that field.

See How She Runs tells the story of Kate who, even though she's married to a rich husband, has two beautiful kids, and lives in a nice house in a good suburban neighborhood, is far from happy. Kate's husband, David, looks upon her more as an object than a person, and isn't adverse to hurting her, mostly with words, but with an occasional punch or slap thrown in for good measure. Finally reaching the breaking point, Kate decides to tell David that she wants a divorce. She finally builds up the courage to tell him, only to be deprived of the chance when, without warning, David suffers a stroke while they're having dinner at a fancy restaurant. Now Kate is really stuck; everyone expects her to help nurse David back to health, to teach him everything that his addled brain has forgotten. There's simply no way for her to leave now, so she remains at her less-than loving husband's side.

Unfortunately for Kate,

David's stroke makes him a worse, not better, person to live with. He becomes spiteful and bitter, angry over what he has lost. David begins to hit Kate again, and their son as well. The breaking point, though, comes when Kate discovers David showing more than a fatherly interest in their five-year-old daughter. Kate files for divorce, and encounters one of modern society's unwritten laws: the judicial system generally works in the favor of the people who have the most money and/or connections. Kate gets custody of the children, but David is granted extremely generous visitation rights. In the meantime, David begins to harass her, though never in ways which are illegal. He also continues to beat their son, so much so that the boy begins to dread having to go stay with his father. Kate tries to fight back, but the system is against her; she can't hope to match David's high-powered, expensive lawyers. Worse yet, the judge sympathizes with David; she views Kate as a hysterical woman who isn't above lying to hurt her ex-husband.

By this point you can't help but feel for Kate. She literally has the world against her, and there seems to be no escape from the living hell she and the children are enduring. It turns out there is one way out, though, but it's an illegal one. Kate hooks up with one of the underground organizations which people like her escape to a better life. Taking her kids with her, Kate runs, heading for New Mexico.

There's actually more to See How She Runs (all of what I've discussed takes place in lengthy flashbacks interspaced throughout the book), but if you want to find out more, you'll have to read the book.

My only complaint about See How She Runs is that it is a bit more predictable than Costello's other novels. In the past Costello has shown no aversion to killing off characters, even major ones. The

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On Sale: May 21! thing is, where before it was difficult to guess who was going to die, and when, you can easily do that with this book. I even guessed the ending a long time before it actually occurred, and I was dead-on right about almost every part of it. It didn't really matter, though, since the plot was interesting enough to hold my attention, and I cared about what happened to the characters.

Regardless of the fact that Costello is coming across a bit more mainstream this time than usual, See How She Runs is still a good solid read, a well-characterized thriller which works from start to finish. Recommended.

-Mike Baker

Bad Girls Do It!, by Michael Newton, Loompanics Press, November 1993, 195 pp., \$14.95. tpb, ISBN 1-55950-104-9

Bad Girls Do It! is the latest from Michael Newton, the author of Hunting Humans, Serial Staughter and Raising Hell, some of the best non-fiction books on serial killers and other related psychos you could hope to find.

With Bad Girls Do It!. Newton takes a look at some of the rarest of criminals: female multiple murderers. After extensive research (he's been working on this material for 10 years now, reading and studying everything he could get his hands on, as the three page bibliography clearly shows), Newton came up with 182 women who qualified, each of whom gets their own fact-filled entry. Notable omissions include Lizzie Borden (she was found innocent by Massachusetts jurors, and Newton bows to their judgement), "Ma" Barker (even though her children did, there's no solid evidence that she ever committed any crimes herself. much less killed anyone) and "Belle" Starr (while most definitely

a thief, there's no proof that she ever killed anyone). Newton also states that even though he tried his best to be as comprehensive as possible, he still might have missed a few cases. (At least he's honest.)

Due to its more limited scope, Bad Girls Do It covers a wider time frame than most of Newton's other work does. While the bulk of the entries deal with modern day killers like Aileen Wournos (who is often mistakenly referred to as the first female serial killer), Sarah Aldrete (aka La Bruja—The Witch) Aldolfo Constanzo's equally vicious girlfriend, and Charlene Galego (who developed a habit of gnawing on her victims), but cases from the 1800's, and even farther back, as well.

Actually, it was these older case studies which I found the most interesting. There's just something fascinating about women like Contacts and an Italian poisoner known only as Toffania (her real name is long forgotten) who not only had triple-digit body count tallys, but whose killing careers lasted for decades. These ladies were so adept at what they did, they make most of today's murderers seem dull by comparison.

Within Bad Girls Do It! you'll also find material on killer nurses (the "Angels of Death" entry in particular will make you never want to visit a hospital again), 'black widows" (women who specialize in killing their mates), women pirates like Anne Bonny, poisoners (poison is the female murderer's weapon of choice, with 33% using it to kill their victims), and much, much more.

Newton scores once again with Bad Girls Do It! It's one of those reference books which belongs on every suspense/horror writer/fan's shelves. It's one of those books which is easy to pick up, but hard to put down. Highly recommended.

-Mike Baker



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